

The New York Review

of Books

November 19, 2015 / Volume LXII, Number 18

President Obama & Marilynne Robinson



**PART TWO OF
THEIR CONVERSATION**

King Lear & the Real King

Svetlana Alexievich: 'The Man Who Flew'

Stacy Schiff: The Nabokovs' Love Story

Marcia Angell: Medical Victims



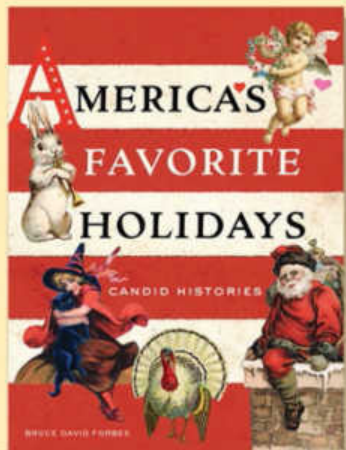
**JUDGE RAKOFF ON
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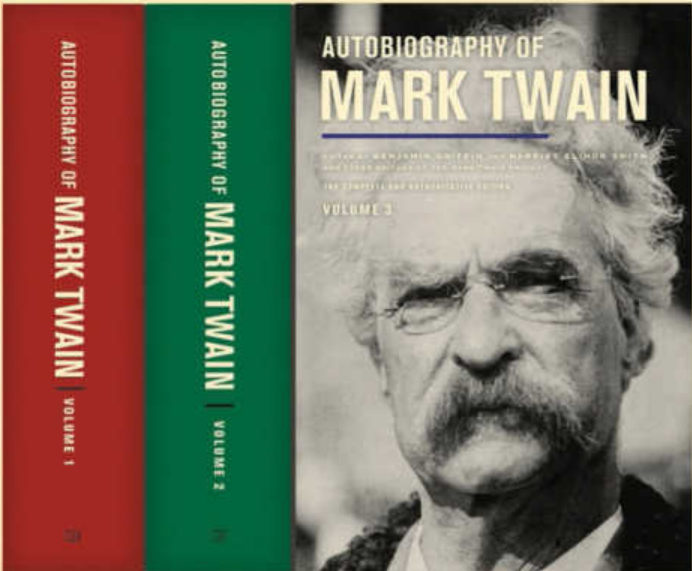
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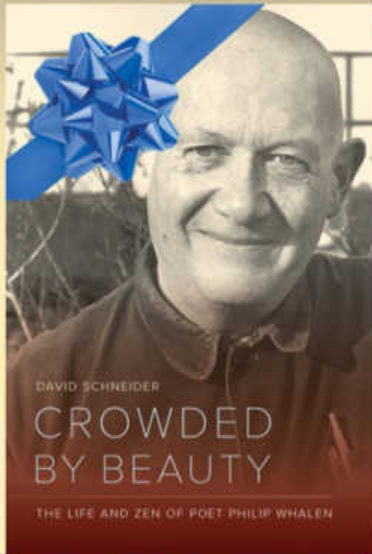
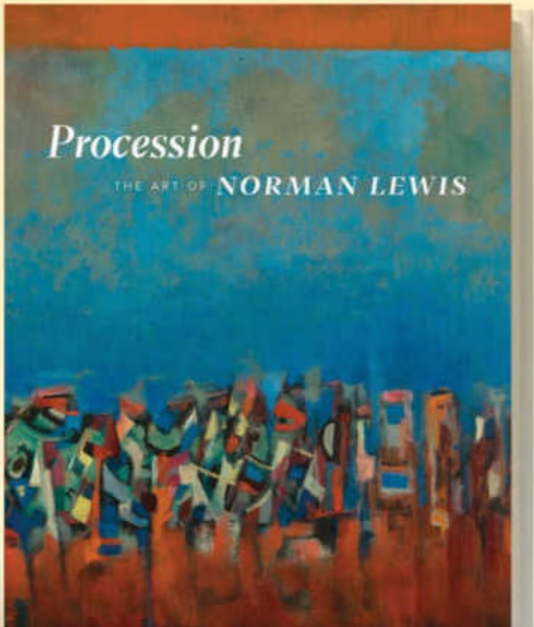
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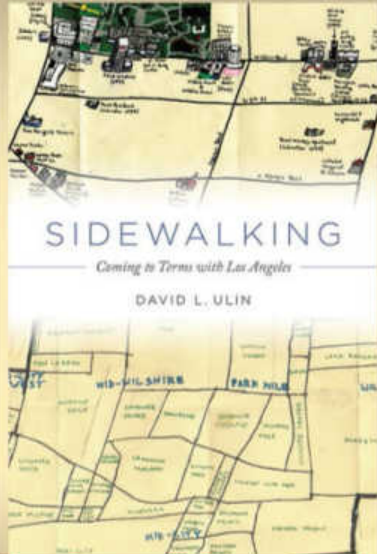
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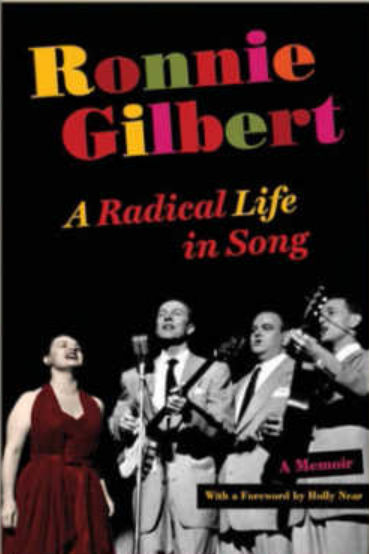
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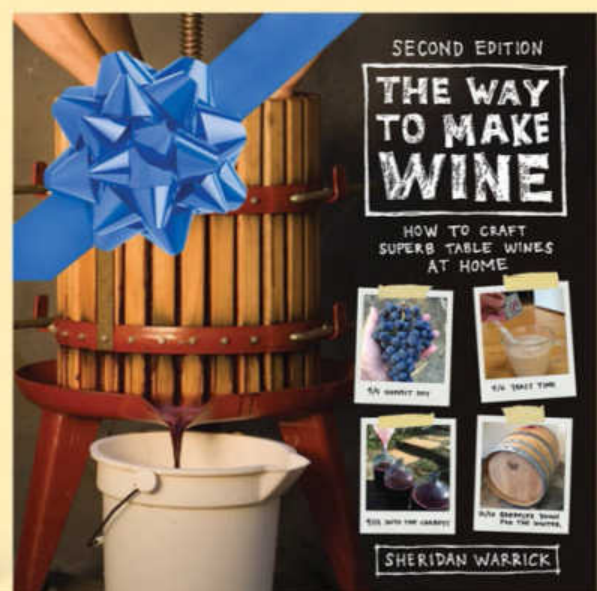
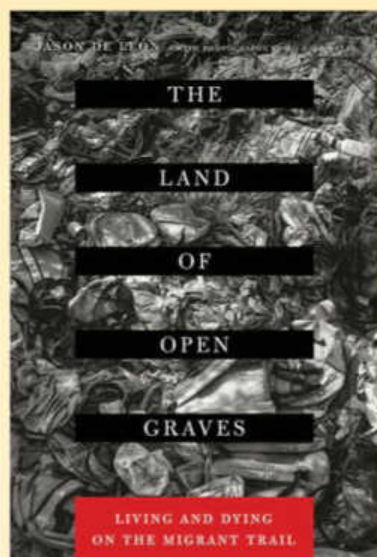
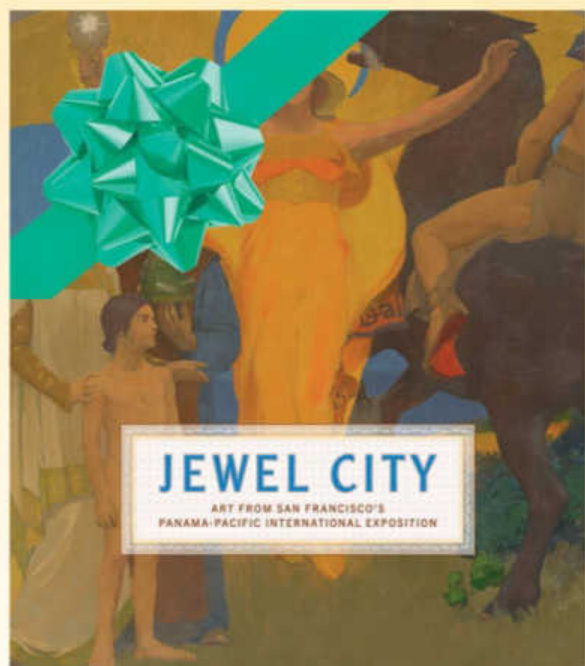


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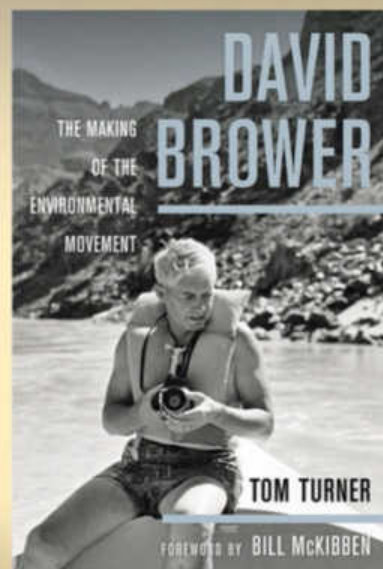
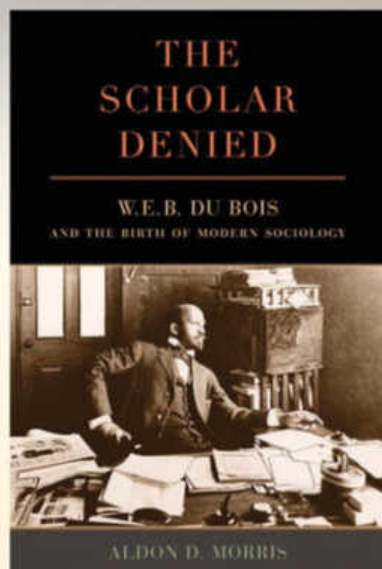
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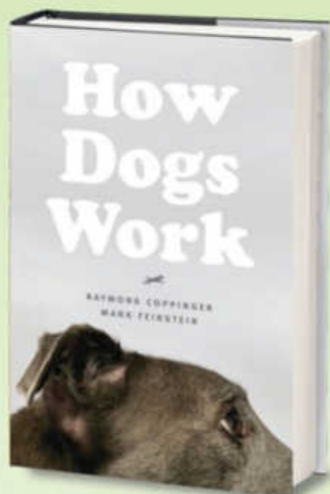


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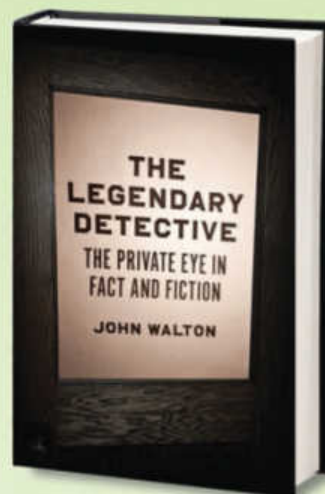


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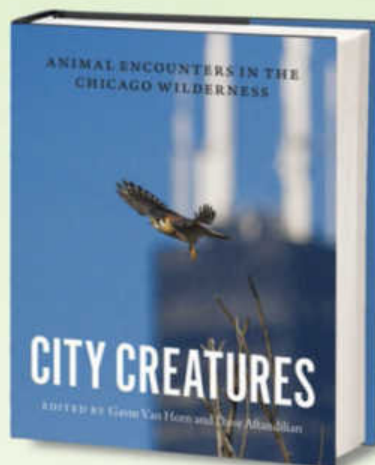
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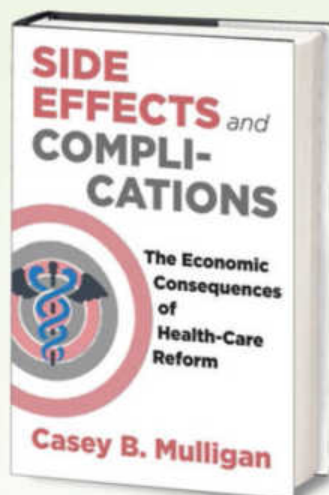
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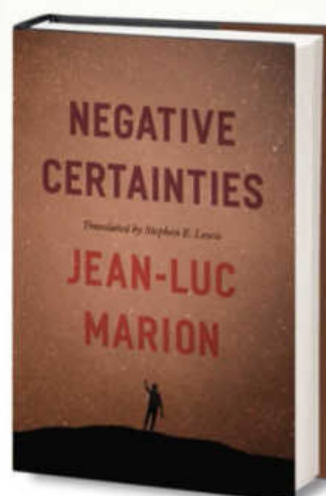
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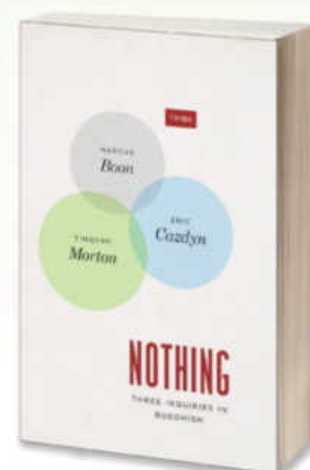


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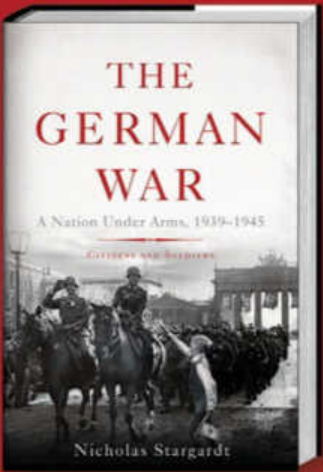
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President Obama & Marilynne Robinson: A Conversation in Iowa

The following conversation between President Obama and Marilynne Robinson was conducted in Des Moines, Iowa, on September 14. An audio recording of the conversation can be heard at itunes.com/nybooks. The first part appeared in the November 5 issue of *The New York Review*.

—The Editors

The President: Are you somebody who worries about people not reading novels anymore? And do you think that has an impact on the culture? When I think about how I understand my role as citizen, setting aside being president, and the most important set of understandings that I bring to that position of citizen, the most important stuff I've learned I think I've learned from novels. It has to do with empathy. It has to do with being comfortable with the notion that the world is complicated and full of grays, but there's still truth there to be found, and that you have to strive for that and work for that. And the notion that it's possible to connect with some[one] else even though they're very different from you.

And so I wonder when you're sitting there writing longhand in some—your messy longhand somewhere—so I wonder whether you feel as if that same shared culture is as prevalent and as important in the lives of people as it was, say, when you were that little girl in Idaho, coming up, or whether you feel as if those voices have been overwhelmed by flashier ways to pass the time.

Marilynne Robinson: I'm not really the person—because I'm almost always talking with people who love books.

The President: Right. You sort of have a self-selecting crew.

Robinson: And also teaching writers—I'm quite aware of the publication of new writers. I think—I mean, the literature at present is full of bursting. No book can sell in that way that *Gone with the Wind* sold, or something like that. But the thing that's wonderful about it is that there's an incredible variety of voices in contemporary writing. You know people say, is there an American tradition surviving in literature, and yes, our tradition is the incredible variety of voices....

And [now] you don't get the conversation that would support the literary life. I think that's one of the things that has made book clubs so popular.

The President: That's interesting. Part of the challenge is—and I see this in our politics—is a common conversation. It's not so much, I think, that people don't read at all; it's that everybody is reading [in] their niche, and so often, at least in the media, they're reading stuff that reinforces their existing point of view. And so you don't have that phenomenon of here's a set of great books that everybody is familiar with and everybody is talking about.

Sometimes you get some TV shows that fill that void, but increasingly now, that's splintered, too, so other than the Super Bowl, we don't have a lot of common reference points. And you can



President Obama and Marilynne Robinson at the airport in Des Moines after their conversation, just before he boarded Air Force One, September 2015

argue that that's part of the reason why our politics has gotten so polarized, is that—when I was growing up, if the president spoke to the country, there were three stations and every city had its own newspaper and they were going to cover that story. And that would last for a couple of weeks, people talking about what the president had talked about.

Today, my poor press team, they're tweeting every two minutes because some new thing has happened, which then puts a premium on the sensational and the most outrageous or a conflict as a way of getting attention and breaking through the noise—which then creates, I believe, a pessimism about the country because all those quiet, sturdy voices that we were talking about at the beginning, they're not heard.

It's not interesting to hear a story about some good people in some quiet place that did something sensible and figured out how to get along.

Robinson: I think that in our earlier history—the Gettysburg Address or something—there was the conscious sense that democracy was an achievement. It was not simply the most efficient modern system or something. It was something that people collectively made and they understood that they held it together by valuing it. I think that in earlier periods—which is not to say one we will never return to—the president himself was this sort of symbolic achievement of democracy. And there was the human respect that I was talking about before, [that] compounds itself in the respect for the personified achievement of a democratic culture. Which is a hard thing—not many people can pull that together, you know.... So I do think that one of the things that we have to realize and

talk about is that we cannot take it for granted. It's a made thing that we make continuously.

The President: A source of optimism—I took my girls to see *Hamilton*, this new musical on Broadway, which you should see. Because this wonderful young Latino playwright produced this play, musical, about Alexander Hamilton and the Founding Fathers. And it's all in rap and hip-hop. And it's all played by young African-American and Latino actors.

And it sounds initially like it would not work at all. And it is brilliant, and so much so that I'm pretty sure this is the only thing that Dick Cheney and I have agreed on—during my entire political career—it speaks to this vibrancy of American democracy, but also the fact that it was made by these living, breathing, flawed individuals who were brilliant. We haven't seen a collection of that much smarts andchutzpah and character in any other nation in history, I think.

But what's most important about [*Hamilton*] and why I think it has received so many accolades is it makes it live. It doesn't feel distant. And it doesn't feel set apart from the arguments that we're having today.

And Michelle and I, when we went to see it, the first thing we thought about was what could we do to encourage this kind of creativity in teaching history to our kids. Because, look, America is famously ahistorical. That's one of our strengths—we forget things. You go to other countries, they're still having arguments from four hundred years ago, and with serious consequences, right? They're bloody arguments. In the Middle East right now, you've got arguments dating back to the seventh century that are live today. And we tend to forget that stuff. We don't

sometimes even remember what happened two weeks ago.

But this point you made about us caring enough about the blood, sweat, and tears involved in maintaining a democracy is vital and important. But it also is the reason why I think those who have much more of an “us” versus “them,” fearful, conspiratorial brand of politics can thrive sometimes is because they can ignore that history.

If, in fact, you don't know much about the evolution of slavery and the civil rights movement and the Civil War and the postwar amendments, then the arguments that are being had now about how our criminal justice system interacts with African-Americans seem pretty foreign. It's like, what are the issues here? If you're not paying attention to how Jefferson and Madison and Franklin and others were thinking about the separation of church and state, then you're not that worried about keeping those lines separate.

Robinson: Exactly. I believe very much in teaching history. I spend an enormous amount of time working with primary sources and various sources and so on. And I think that a lot of the history that is taught is a sort of shorthand that's not representative of much of anything. I think that's too bad.

The President: Do you pay a lot of attention to day-to-day politics these days?

Robinson: I do actually. I read the news for a couple of hours every morning.

The President: Right. And how do you think your writer's sensibility changes how you think about it? Or are you just kind of in the mix like everybody else, and just, ah, that red team drives me nuts, and you're cheering for the blue?

Robinson: Well, if I'm going to be honest, I think that there are some political candidacies that are much more humane in their implications and consequences than others. I mean, if suddenly poles were to be reversed and what I see as humanistic came up on the other side, there I'd be. I think in my essay on fear I was talking about the assumption of generosity in this culture, you know? We have done some very magnanimous things in our history.

The President: Yes.

Robinson: Which seem in many ways unifying, defining. And then you see people running on what seem to be incredibly mean-spirited, tight-fisted assumptions, and you think, this is not us. This is not our way forward. Well, I'm getting all too political, but insulting people that you know will become citizens—however that's managed—giving them this bitter memory to carry into their participation in the national life. Why do that?

The President: We're going through a spasm of fear. And you're seeing it

*“Fear,” *The New York Review*, September 24, 2015.

LEO TOLSTOY, **Anna Karenina**, translated by Marian Schwartz, edited and with an introduction by Gary Saul Morson ■ “If translators are, as Alexander Pushkin said, the post-horses of civilisation, [this book has] come to us on the backs of thoroughbreds.”—Carol Apollonio, *Times Literary Supplement* ■ PB-with Flaps

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PATRICK MODIANO, **Suspended Sentences: Three Novellas**, translated by Mark Polizzotti ■ “Vividly translated by Mark Polizzotti . . . [and] as good a place as any to enter the long, slow-moving river of Modiano’s fiction.”—Alan Riding, *New York Times Book Review* ■ PB-with Flaps

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elsewhere. This is not unique to the United States. You see the emergence of the far-right parties in Europe. I think that it's a moment of great change, and the change happens fast. And there have been periods in our history where change happened fast like this, and people just are trying to find firm footing.

When you're looking for firm footing, one of the easiest places to go is, somebody else is to blame. And the market system globally right now does create a situation where workers—ordinary people—have less control.

When you were growing up, when I was growing up, the majority of people had confidence that if they lost their job, it would be temporary, that they often would be with the same company for years, that there would be a pension in place, that they would be able to support a family, and that their kids would probably have a better life than they did. And people feel less confident about that because workers have less leverage, and capital is mobile and labor is not. And we haven't adapted our systems to take into account how fast this is moving.

What's frustrating to me is just that it wouldn't take that much for us to make the system work for ordinary people again.

Robinson: If I could strike one word out of the American vocabulary, it would be "competition." I think that that is the most bogus thing that has been entered into our [laughter]—

The President: Now, you're talking to a guy who likes to play basketball and has been known to be a little competitive. But go ahead. [Laughter.]

Robinson: But what we're really telling people is that if they do not acquire nameless skills of a technological character, they will not have employment. It will be shipped out of the country. So basically it's a language of coercion that implies to people that their lives are fragile, that is charged with that kind of unspecific fear that makes people—it's meant to make people feel that they can't get their feet on the ground.

The President: Right. Now, the argument would be, though, that that's the reality that people are feeling because companies can go anywhere and—

Robinson: Exactly, but when I look at these other economies we're supposed to be competing with, they're fragile. They're very fragile. And we're seeing that now. So all the competition has meant, it seems, is that labor is cheap and environmental standards are low. Look at, frankly, China. China has a vile ecology around its industrial centers. It's running out of appropriate cheap labor. And it's going into crisis. And what does that mean? It means that all of that capital will bundle itself up and land in another place that's relatively more advantageous. So what are we competing with? We run China into the ground, is that our great mission?

The President: Well, in fact, historically, the way we "competed" was we educated our kids better. We put more money into research. We believed in science and facts, as opposed to being driven by superstition. We welcomed talent from all around the world. We put in place a social safety net so people felt that they could take risks without—

Robinson: That's crucial.

The President: —without being utterly destitute.

Robinson: And having good bankruptcy laws. We have very liberal bankruptcy laws. But you know, we generate fantastic ideas—ideas move as fast as capital does. We can have the most brilliant population in the world, and if the best ideas that we have are sent offshore, we're still in the same position.

The President: Right. We made progress on all these fronts. Slowly but surely. Where I completely agree with you, Marilynne, is that we have everything we need to thrive. And it is interesting watching the current political season for me because I'm not on the ballot, so although obviously I still have a huge stake in the outcome as a citizen, in addition to soon being an ex-president—and there are times where I'm listening to folks make these wild claims about how terrible America is doing, and I want to just press the pause button here for a second and remind them that by almost every economic criterion we are hugely better off than we were just seven years ago; that we have done far better than almost every advanced country, and certainly every large advanced country on earth, in terms of growing the economy, driving down unemployment, managing our budgets.

And the only thing that right now is holding us back is Washington dysfunction. We could knock off another percentage point on the unemployment rate if we started rebuilding roads and bridges and airports. You travel—it's embarrassing when you go to other airports in other countries. Ours used to be the nicest ones.

Robinson: They were nice first, and then all [laughter]—

The President: Yes. Now they're a little worn down. We got to keep them up.

The same is true with our education system. It is outstanding, but we've got—everybody else is caught up. We got to step it up.

So one of the reasons I'm here in Iowa is to talk about two years of college education—or two years of community college education for everybody, as free as high school was before. Research—we have fallen behind in basic research that created all these amazing technological wonders upon which our economic engine ran.

And finally, making sure that people get paid enough money that they can support a family. Because all the evidence in history shows that when workers get paid a reasonable salary, then they spend it, businesses do better, the economy does better, and our political system does better. I mean, what is true is that when people feel pinched, then the generosity that you describe narrows to my immediate family, my immediate community, my immediate group.

Robinson: It's amazing. You know, when I go to Europe or—England is usually where I go—they say, what are you complaining about? Everything is great. [Laughter.] I mean, really. Comparisons that they make are never at our disadvantage.

The President: No—but, as I said, we have a dissatisfaction gene that can

be healthy if harnessed. If it tips into rage and paranoia, then it can be debilitating and just be a self-fulfilling prophecy, because we end up blocking progress in serious ways.

Robinson: Restlessness of, like, why don't we do something about this yellow fever? There's generous restlessness.

The President: That's a good restlessness.

Robinson: Yes, absolutely. And then there is a kind of acidic restlessness that—

The President: I want more stuff.

Robinson: I want more stuff, or other people are doing things that I'm justifiably resenting. That sort of thing.



President Obama presenting the National Humanities Medal to Marilynne Robinson at the White House, July 2013

The President: Right.

Robinson: I was not competing with anyone else. Nobody knew what my project was. I didn't know what it was. But what does freedom mean? I mean, really, the ideal of freedom if it doesn't mean that we can find out what is in this completely unique being that each one of us is? And competition narrows that. It's sort of like, you should not be studying this; you should be studying that, pouring your life down the siphon of economic utility.

The President: But doesn't part of that depend on people having different definitions of success, and that we've narrowed what it means to be successful in a way that makes people very anxious? They don't feel affirmed if they're good at something that the society says isn't that important or doesn't reward.

Probably the best example for me is the teaching profession, where I can't tell you how many kids I meet—and I used to meet them in law school when I was teaching there—who had taught for two, three, four years, they loved teaching, and they thought it was just the most important thing. And you could tell that this was their calling, and at a certain point they couldn't afford to raise a family on it and they got discouraged, and—

Robinson: Somebody was looking over their shoulder.

The President: Somebody was looking—or they'd get some comment from a classmate who had gone on to become an investment banker, they just eventually got discouraged and you didn't have a society that supported what they

were doing, despite the fact that—talk about a complicated, magnificent art. Teaching. Being able to transmit ideas to young minds.

And so I like your definition of what America and freedom should be. But it does require all of us to have different definitions. And you have systems—or it requires a broader set of definitions than we have right now. And that's true for businesspeople, as well. I can't tell you how many businesspeople I meet [for whom] their joy is in organizing things to create products and services, and to help people be useful in various ways. And because they've got quarterly reports to shareholders and if they've made a long-term investment that may pay off way down the line, or if they're paying their employees more now because they think it's going to help them retain high-quality employees, a lot of times they feel like they're going to get punished in the stock market. And so they don't do it, because the definition of being a successful business is narrowed to what your quarterly earnings reports are....

So my last question to Marilynne is, when you think about your books and you think about your faith and you think about your citizenship as an American, when do you feel most optimistic? What makes you think, you know what, this experiment is going to keep going, I feel encouraged?

Robinson: Well, you know, I mean, when I do book signings, for example, and people come up one by one and talk to me about their lives, if there's time [to] do that, how earnest they are, how deeply committed they are to sustaining people they feel close to or responsible for and so on—there they are, the people that you think of as the sustainers of a good society.

And it's only—really, if we could all just turn off media for a week, I think we would come out the other side of it with a different anthropology in effect. I wish we could have a normal politics where I disagree with people, they present their case, we take a vote, and if I lose I say, yes, that's democracy, I'm on the losing side of a meaningful vote.

The President: And I'll try to make a better argument the next time.

Robinson: Exactly.

The President: I'll try to persuade more people the next time.

Robinson: And I think in little groups, like my department at the university or something—people get together, talk something over, take a vote, and that's it. And it's a little microcosm of democracy. That's what it's supposed to be.

The President: Yes, but that does require a presumption of goodness in other people.

Robinson: Absolutely.

The President: And that's not just what our democracy depends on, but I think that's what a good life depends on. Occasionally, you'll be disappointed, but more often than not, your faith will be confirmed.

Robinson: I believe that. □
—This is the second part of a two-part conversation.

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The Man Who Flew

Svetlana Alexievich

Introduction

On October 8, the Nobel Committee announced that the 2015 Nobel Prize for Literature was being awarded to Svetlana Alexievich, a writer and journalist whose body of work is unique both in scope and in genre.

The bare facts of Alexievich's biography reflect the nature of her greater subject: the memory, aspirations, tragedy, and fluid historical identity of *Homo sovieticus*. She was born in Ivano-Frankivsk, a city in western Ukraine that lies at the eastern edge of the Carpathian Mountains, about 85 miles south of Lviv, and a mere 150 or so miles from the borders of Poland, Romania, Hungary, and Slovakia, respectively. The city was annexed by the USSR only a few years before her birth in 1948. Her mother was Ukrainian and her father Belarussian. She grew up in Minsk, Belarus, where she studied journalism, developed her own exceptional voice, and became a Russian writer.

Over the course of several decades and numerous books, Alexievich has pursued a distinctive kind of narrative based on journalistic research and the distillation of thousands of first-hand interviews with people directly affected by all the major events of the Soviet and post-Soviet period. She has uncovered the unknown but crucial work that Soviet women did in World War II, recounted the memories of children caught up in the "Great Patriotic War," documented the realities facing soldiers in the Soviet-Afghan war, which were kept from the Soviet public, and recorded the experiences of



Svetlana Alexievich

Archive of Svetlana Alexievich

those who lived through the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

In her most recent book, she deftly orchestrates a great chorus of diverse voices to chronicle the human toll—emotional, physical, economic, and political—of the collapse of the USSR, a country that once made up a sixth of the world's land mass.¹ Alexievich's oeuvre comprises nothing less than a history of epic proportions, which she has called "Voices of Utopia." This undertaking has brought the writer many awards and accolades from Western European countries in particular, and from Russia, where her books have been printed and reprinted many times; she is a well-

¹To be published in 2016 under the tentative title *Time Second Hand* by Fitzcarrald Editions, London.

known critic of the Putin regime. In her home, Belarus, however, under the dictatorship of Aleksandr Lukashenko, she has been subject to the same political censorship and pressure as many of her colleagues (as Timothy Snyder pointed out in the *NYR Daily*²). For over a decade she lived in various European cities, because it was not safe to return to Minsk (though she did in 2011), and her books have not been published in Belarus since 1994.

In announcing the award, the Swedish Academy called Alexievich's "polyphonic writings... a monument to suffering and courage in our time." "By means of her extraordinary method—a carefully composed collage of human

²"Svetlana Alexievich: The Truth in Many Voices," October 12, 2015.

voices," the Academy went on to say, "Alexievich deepens our comprehension of an entire era." As she writes:

I don't just record a dry history of events and facts, I'm writing a history of human feelings. What people thought, understood and remembered during the event. What they believed in or mistrusted, what illusions, hopes and fears they experienced. This is impossible to imagine or invent, at any rate in such multitude of real details. We quickly forget what we were like ten or twenty or fifty years ago....

I'm searching life for observations, nuances, details. Because my interest in life is not the event as such, not war as such, not Chernobyl as such, not suicide as such. What I am interested in is what happens to the human being....

Svetlana Alexievich's interest in what happens to the human being is evident on every page of her writing. Among other things, her work testifies to the immense power of compassion to create understanding of our fellow human beings.

The text below is from a collection of more than a dozen tales of suicide that Alexievich published in Russia in 1994 under the title *Zacharovannye smert'iu* (Enchanted by Death). In the introduction she wrote that she sought to "distinguish... the lonely human voice. They all sound different. Each one has its own secret."

—Jamey Gambrell

From the account of his friend, Vladimir Stanivuevich, graduate student in the Philosophy Department:

...He wanted to leave unnoticed, of course. It was evening. Twilight. But several students in the nearby dormitory saw him jump. He opened his window wide, stood up on the sill, and looked down for a long time. Then he turned around, pushed hard, and flew... He flew from the twelfth floor...

A woman was passing by with a little boy. The youngster looked up:

"Mama, look, that man is flying like a bird..."

He flew for five seconds...

The district police officer told me all this when I returned to the dormitory; I was the only person who could be called his friend in any sense. The next day I saw a photo in the evening paper: he lay on the pavement face down... in the pose of a flying man...

I can try to put some of it into words... Although everything is slipping away... You and I won't make it out of this labyrinth... It will be a partial explanation, a physical explanation, not a spiritual one. For instance, there's something called the trust hotline. A person calls and says: "I want to commit suicide." In fifteen minutes they dissuade

him. They find out the reason. But it isn't really the reason, it's the trigger...

The day before he saw me in the hall: "Be sure to come by. We have to talk."

That evening I knocked on his door several times, but he didn't open it. Through the wall I could hear he was there (our rooms are adjacent). He was pacing. Back and forth. Back and forth. "Well," I thought, "I'll drop by tomorrow." Tomorrow I talked to the policeman.

"What's this?" The policeman showed me a vaguely familiar folder.

I leaned over the table:

"It's his dissertation. There's the title page: *Marxism and Religion*."

All the pages were crossed out. Diagonally, in red pencil, he'd written furiously: "Nonsense!! Gibberish!! Lies!!" It was his handwriting... I recognized it...

He was always afraid of water... I remember that from our college days. But he'd never said that he was afraid of heights...

His dissertation didn't pan out. Well, to hell with it! You have to admit you're a prisoner of utopia... Why jump from the twelfth floor on account of that? These days how many people are re-writing their master's essay, their doctoral dissertation, and how many are afraid to admit what the title was?

It's embarrassing, uncomfortable... Maybe he decided: I'll throw off these clothes and this physical shell...

Behavioral logic didn't lead to this, but the act was committed nonetheless... There's the concept of fate. You've been given a path to follow... You rise to it... You either rise, or fall... I think he believed that there is another life... In a thin layer... Was he religious? This is where speculation begins... If he believed, it was without intermediaries, without cultish organizations, without any ritual. But suicide is impossible for a religious person, he wouldn't dare violate God's plan... Break the thread... The trigger mechanism works more easily for atheists. They don't believe in another life, aren't afraid of what might be. What's the difference between seventy years or a hundred? It's just a moment, a grain of sand. A molecule of time...

He and I once talked about socialism not resolving the problem of death, or at least of old age. It just skirts it...

I saw him make the acquaintance of a crazy guy in a used bookstore. This guy, too, was rummaging around in old books on Marxism, like we were. Then he told me:

"You know what he said? 'I'm the one who's normal—but you're suffering.' And you know, he was right."

I think that he was a sincere Marxist and saw Marxism as a humanitarian idea, where "we" means much more than "I." Like some kind of unified planetary civilization in the future... When you'd drop by his room he'd be lying there, surrounded by books: Plekhanov, Marx, biographies of Hitler, Stalin, Hans Christian Andersen stories, Bunin, the Bible, the Koran. He was reading it all at once. I remember some fragments of his thoughts, but only fragments. I reconstructed them afterward... I'm trying to find meaning in his death... Not an excuse, not a reason... Meaning! In his words...

"What is the difference between a scholar and a priest? The priest comes to know the unknown through faith. But the scholar tries to comprehend it through facts, through knowledge. Knowledge is rational. But let's take death, for instance. Just death. Death goes beyond thought.

"We Marxists have taken on the role of church ministers. We say we know the answer to the question: How do you make everyone happy? How?! My favorite childhood book was *The Human-Amphibian* by A. Belyaev. I reread it again recently. It's a response to all the utopians of the world... The father turns his son into a human-amphibian. He wants to give him the oceans of the world, to make him happy

Changing the Conversations that Change the World



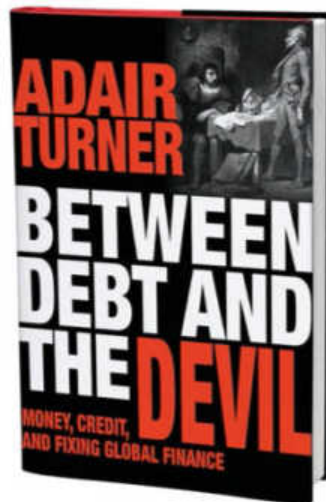
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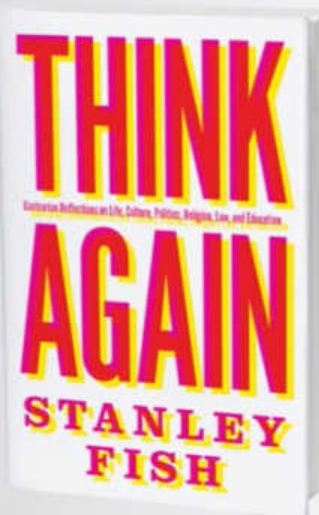
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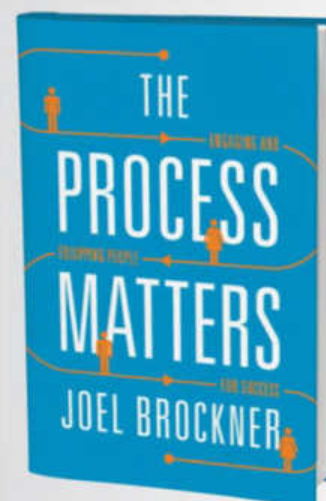
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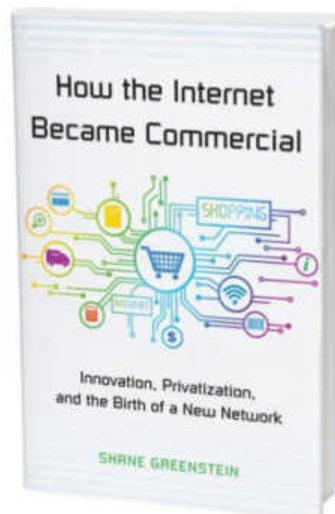
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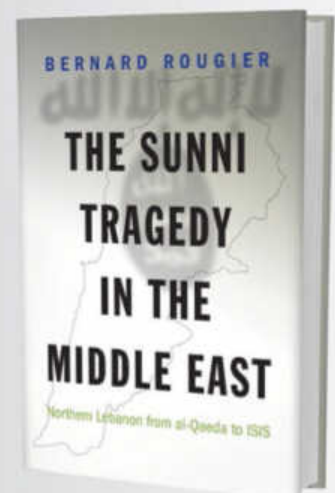
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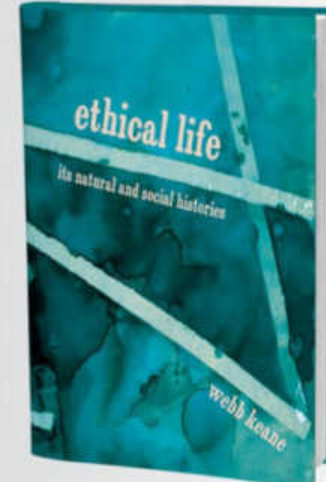
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by changing his human nature. He's a brilliant engineer... The father believes that he's uncovered the secret... That he's God! He made his son into the most miserable of people... Nature doesn't reveal itself to human reason... It only entices it."

Here are a few more of his monologues. As I remember them, at least.

"The phenomenon of Hitler will trouble many minds for a long time to come. Excite them. How, after all, is the mechanism of mass psychosis launched? Mothers held their children up crying: 'Here, Führer, take them!'"

"We are consumers of Marxism. Who can say he knows Marxism? Knows Lenin, knows Marx? There's early Marx... And Marx at the end of his life... The half-tones, shades, the whole blossoming complexity of it all, is unknowable to us. No one can increase our knowledge. We are all interpreters..."

"At the moment we're stuck in the past like we used to be stuck in the future. I also thought I hated this my whole life, but it turns out that I loved it. Loved?... How can anyone possibly love this pool of blood? This cemetery? What filth, what nightmares... what blood is mixed into it all... But I do love it!"

"I proposed a new dissertation topic to our professor: 'Socialism as an Intellectual Mistake.' His response was: 'Nonsense.' As if I could decipher the Bible or the Apocalypse with equal success. Well, nonsense is a form of creativity, too... The old man was bewildered. You know him yourself—he's not one of those old farts, but everything that happened was a personal tragedy for him. I have to rewrite my dissertation, but how can he rewrite his life?"

Right now each of us has to rehabilitate himself. There's a mental illness—multiple, or dissociated, personality disorder. People who have it forget their names, social positions, their friends and even their children, their lives. It's a dissolution of personality... when a person can't combine the official take or government belief, his own point of view, and his doubts... how true is what he thinks, and how true is what he says. The personality splits into two or three parts... There are plenty of history teachers and professors in psychiatric hospitals... The better they were at instilling something, the more they were corrupted... At the very least three generations... and a few others are infected... How mysteriously everything eludes definition... The temptation of utopia...

"Take Jack London... Remember his story about how you can live life even if you're in a straitjacket? You just have to shrivel up, sink down, and get used to it... You'll even be able to dream..."

Now that I analyze what he said... follow his train of thought... I can see that he was preparing for departure...

We were drinking tea one time, and out of the blue he said:

"I know how long I have..."

"Vanya, what on earth are you saying!" my wife exclaimed. "We were just getting ready to marry you off."

"I was joking. You know, animals never commit suicide. They don't violate the course..."

The day after that conversation the dormitory housekeeper found a suit, practically brand new, in the rubbish bin; his passport was in the pocket. She ran to his room. He was embarrassed and muttered something about having been drunk. But he never ever touched a drop! He kept the passport, but gave her the suit: "I don't need it anymore."

He'd decided to get rid of these clothes, this physical membrane. He



'Marx as Prometheus'; engraving, 1843

had a more subtle, detailed understanding than we did of what awaited him. And he liked Christ's age.

One might think he'd gone mad. But a few weeks earlier I'd heard his research presentation... Water-tight logic. A superb defense!

Does a person really need to know when his time will come? I once knew a guy who knew it. A friend of my father's. When he left for the war, a gypsy woman prophesied: he needn't be afraid of bullets because he wouldn't die in the war, but at age fifty-eight at home, sitting in an armchair. He went through the whole war, came under fire, was known as a foolhardy fellow, and was sent on the most difficult missions. He returned without a scratch. Until age fifty-seven he drank and smoked since he knew he'd die at fifty-eight, so until then he could do anything. His last year was terrible... He was constantly afraid of death... He was waiting for it... And he died at age fifty-eight, at home... in an armchair in front of the television...

Is it better for a person when the line has been drawn? The border between here and there? This is where the questions begin...

Once I suggested he dig into his childhood memories and desires, what he'd dreamed of and then forgotten.

He could fulfill them now... He never talked to me about his childhood. Then suddenly he opened up. From the age of three months he had lived in the country with his grandmother. When he got a bit older he would stand on a tree stump and wait for his mama. Mama returned after he'd finished school, with three brothers and sisters—each child from a different man. He studied at the university, kept ten rubles for himself, and sent the rest of his stipend home. To Mama...

"I don't remember her ever washing anything for me, not even a handkerchief. But in the summer I'll go back to the country: I'll repaper the walls. And if she says a kind word to me, I'll be so happy..."

He never had a girlfriend...

His brother came for him from the countryside. He was in the morgue... We began looking for a woman to help, to wash him, dress him. There are women who do that sort of thing. When she came she was drunk. I dressed him myself...

In the village I sat alone with him all night. Amid the old men and women. His brother didn't hide the truth, although I'd asked him not to say anything, at least to their mother. But he got drunk and blabbed everything. It poured for two days. At the cemetery a tractor had to pull the car with the casket. The old ladies crossed themselves fearfully and zealously:

"Went against God's will, he did."

The priest wouldn't let him be buried in the cemetery: he'd committed an unforgivable sin... But the director of the village council arrived in a van and gave

his permission...

We returned at twilight. Wet. Destroyed. Drunk. It occurred to me that for some reason righteous men and dreamers always choose these kinds of places. This is the only kind of place they are born. Our conversations about Marxism as a unified planetary civilization floated up in my memory. About Christ being the first socialist. And about how the mystery of Marxist religion wasn't fully comprehensible to us, even though we were up to our knees in blood.

Everyone sat down at the table. They poured me a glass of homemade vodka right away. I drank it...

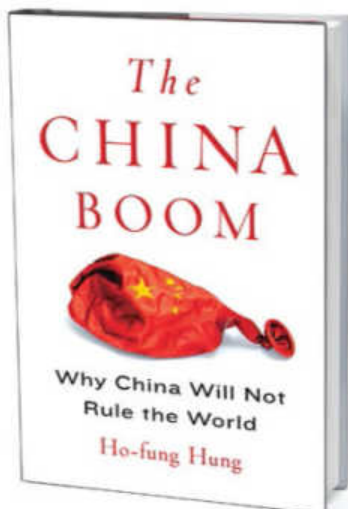
A year later my wife and I went to the cemetery again...

"He's not here," my wife said. "When we came the other times we were visiting him, this time it's just a tombstone. Remember how he used to smile in photographs?"

So he had moved on. Women are more delicate instruments than men, and she felt it.

The landscape was the same. Wet. Dilapidated. Drunk. His mother showered us with apples for the trip. The tipsy tractor driver drove us to the bus stop...

—Translated from the Russian by Jamey Gambrell



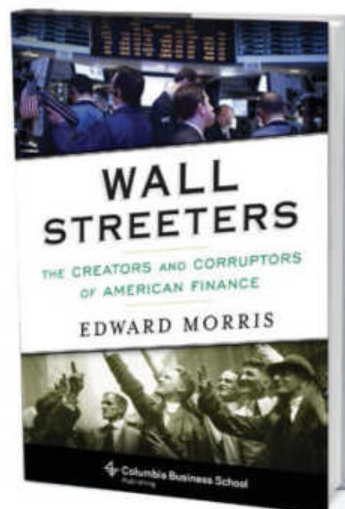
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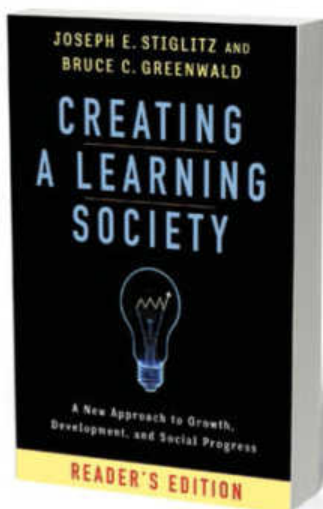
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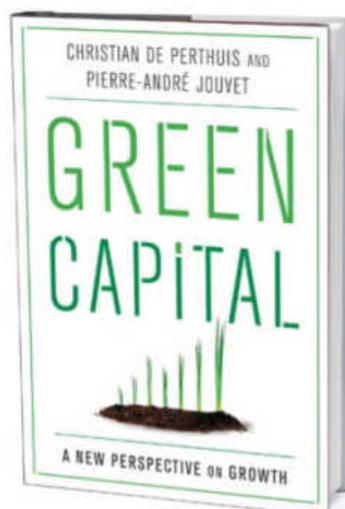
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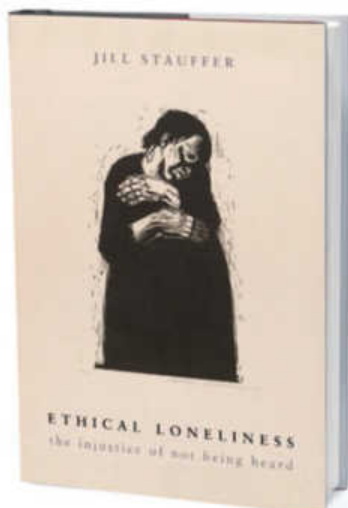
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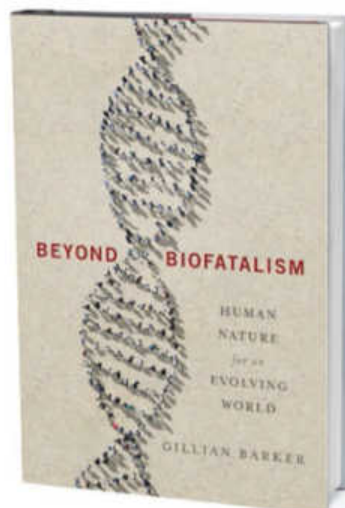
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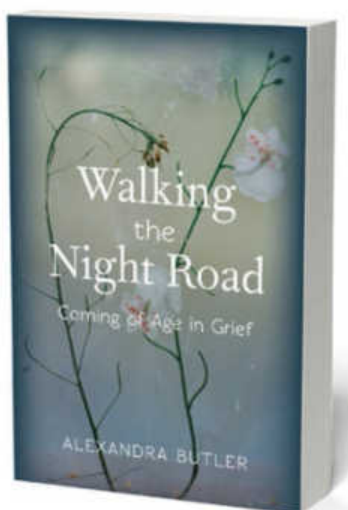
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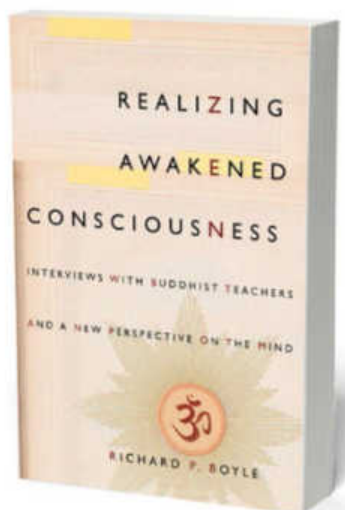
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Late Francis Bacon: Spirit & Substance

Colm Tóibín

Lent by Ananda Foundation N.Y./© The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved./DACS, London/ARS, NY 2015. Photography by Stefan Altenburger. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.



Francis Bacon: Three Studies for Self-Portrait, 1976; oil on canvas, in three parts, each 14 x 12 inches

In his book *On Late Style*, published after his death, the critic Edward Said ponders the aura surrounding work produced by artists in the last years of their lives. He asks: “Does one grow wiser with age, and are there unique qualities of perception and form that artists acquire as a result of age in the late phase of their career?” He considers the idea that some late works possess “a special maturity, a new spirit of reconciliation and serenity often expressed in terms of a miraculous transfiguration of common reality.” Yet he also questions the very notion of late serenity: “But what of artistic lateness not as harmony and resolution but as intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction? What if age and ill health don’t produce the serenity of ‘ripeness is all’?”

Said further ponders, as must anyone who thinks about this subject, the sheer strangeness of Ludwig van Beethoven’s late string quartets and his last piano sonatas, their insistence on breaking with easy form, their restlessness, their aura of incompleteness (especially the piano sonatas), the feeling that they are striving toward some set of musical textures that have not yet been imagined and cannot be achieved in Beethoven’s lifetime. In other words, it is that these late pieces wish to represent the mind or the imagination not as it faces death but rather as it faces life, as it sets out to reimagine a life with new beginnings and new possibilities but also with the ragged sense that there might not be much time.

Said quotes Theodor Adorno on late Beethoven: “Touched by death, the hand of the master sets free the masses of material that he used to form; its tears and fissures, witnesses to the final powerlessness of the I confronted with Being, are its final work.” As Said would have it, Adorno does not see late style as a departure. Rather, “lateness includes the idea that one cannot really go beyond lateness at all, cannot transcend or lift oneself out of lateness, but can only deepen the lateness.” Finally, Said demands that we read late work with due subtlety, noting continuity as much as rupture, noting a deepening of something rather than a new departure. “As Adorno said about Beethoven,” Said writes, “late style does not admit the definitive cadences of death; instead, death appears in a refracted mode, as irony.”

Two weeks before he died, as his heart was failing, the poet W.B. Yeats wrote a poem he titled “Cuchulain Comforted,” which begins with a set of clear statements free of metaphor, tonally stark, sharp, and pointed almost like the arrows that appear in some of Francis Bacon’s work. The poem was written in terza rima, a form new to Yeats. Unusually for his work, this poem did not need many drafts. It seemed to have come to him simply, easily, almost naturally. In earlier Yeats poems and plays, Cuchulain, a figure from Irish mythology, had appeared as the implacable and solitary hero, prepared for single combat, free of fear. Now he has “six mortal wounds” and is attended by figures—Shrouds—who encourage him to join them in the act of sewing rather than fighting. They let him know that they themselves are not among the heroic dead but are “Convicted cowards all by kindred slain// Or driven from home and left to die in fear.”

Thus, at the very end of his life, Yeats created an image that seemed the very opposite of what had nourished his imagination most. His heroic figure has now been gentled; his fierce and solitary warrior has joined others in the act of sewing; instead of the company of brave men, Cuchulain seems content to rest finally among cowards. This poem, then, is not a culminating statement for Yeats but a contradictory one; it is not a crowning version of a familiar poetic form but an experiment in a form associated most with Dante. Instead of attempting to sum up, it is as though Yeats wished to release fresh energy by repudiating, by beginning again, by offering his hero a set of images alien to him that served all the more to give the hero ambiguity, felt life, unsettlement.

In this way, late work becomes itself unsettling. And in the late work of other writers this example of an imagination refusing to lie down and sum up can be seen. It would be easy to imagine, for example, that Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* was written toward the end of his life. In fact, it was written in 1911, when Mann was thirty-six. It is a young man’s book; its images of desire, decay, and death could not be so easily entertained by a writer facing into late or last work.

Mann’s last work, in fact, was a comedy, a book filled with trickery and

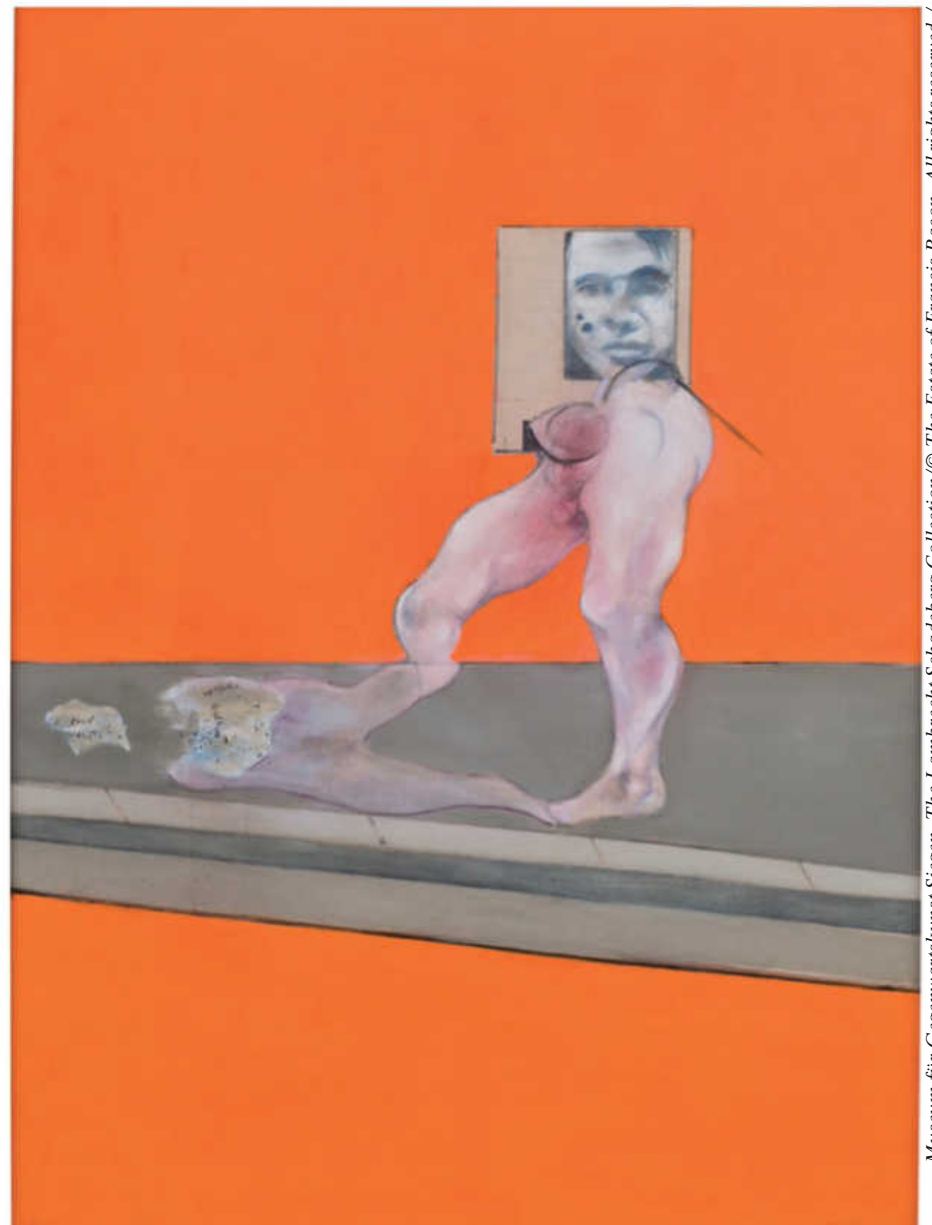
amusing, almost throwaway parodies. It was begun when Mann was in his mid-thirties and continued when he was seventy-five and prone to illness, around the time when he would return from America to live in Switzerland. The book is titled *Confessions of Felix Krull, Confidence Man*. In its use of a heavy style to convey light material, in its episodic structure, in the sheer roguishness of Felix Krull, the novel represents a rueful commentary on its author’s own past seriousness, as well as a way of proposing a fresh start for him, narrated by a trickster. But more important, perhaps, is the fact that Mann completed volume one

with the suggestion that subsequent volumes would follow. The picaresque story that Felix told of his exploits was open-ended. It left room for Mann to continue as though there would be no end. Its very lightness set about defying death, even if Mann died a year after the book’s publication.

“Every piece of work,” Mann wrote, “is a realization, fragmentary but complete in itself, of our individuality.” Perhaps the writer whose individuality seems to intensify the most, becoming in his late work both more mysterious and more apparent, is Bacon’s close contemporary Samuel Beckett. Beckett’s work in the 1980s—he died in 1989 at the age of eighty-three— pares down form and language to a minimum in both fiction and drama.

Two of Beckett’s very last works throw interesting light on the work of Bacon, especially the late paintings. Both are concerned with the figure or the self as protean, uncertain, unsingular, ready to be doubled or shadowed, poised to move outward into a second self, or another self, or into a figure hovering near, waiting for substance.

In *Nacht und Träume*, for example, written for German television in 1982, a figure known simply as A dreams a second figure, B, into being. Two hands then appear as part of the dream. There are no words, merely snatches of the Schubert lied “Nacht und Träume.”



Francis Bacon: Study from the Human Body and Portrait, 1988; oil on canvas, 78 x 58 1/8 inches

Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen, The Lambert Schadeberg Collection/© The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved./DACS, London/ARS, NY 2015. Photography by Christian Wickler. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.



Francis Bacon: Sand Dune, 1983; oil and pastel on canvas, 78 x 58 inches

The dream fades when A awakens, only for the sequence to repeat itself more slowly as the music is heard once again. The short play is not concerned with death so much as with the fluidity of the self, or the way in which night and dream and indeed ghostly music allow the self to move into another realm, a shadow realm, or a realm made possible by the imagination itself in which another figure waits.

Nacht und Träume is Beckett's penultimate play. In prose, the very last piece he wrote was *Stirrings Still*, conceived toward the end of 1984 and completed three years later. This short text starts with the same idea as *Nacht und Träume*. It questions the autonomy, the singleness of the self. It begins: "One night as he sat at his table head on hands he saw himself rise and go." The opening of the second paragraph repeats this with a minor variation. The figure is not, however, moving toward death, but toward another place in life. He will disappear only to reappear. The piece ends with: "Time and grief and self so-called. Oh all to end." The very core of the process of fiction—the idea of self—is questioned here and undermined. This is fundamental to the drama that Beckett created as last work.

In this context, it is useful to look at Bacon's grave triptych *Three Studies for Self-Portrait* (1976), with its three faces fluid against a black background. As the eye moves from left to right, the face in the first section appears like a mask. It is fully visible in the center panel, gazing outward. In the right-hand section, the face is already in another realm, some of it having merged with the blackness. What little of it re-

mains has an aura of enormous suffering. It is not nothing, just as Beckett's "Oh all to end" emphasizes the fact of utterance within a continuity rather than an actual end. Nothing has ended. Instead of nothing, there is "all," or the irony surrounding all.

As with Beckett's *Nacht und Träume* or *Stirrings Still*, it would be too crude to suggest that *Three Studies for Self-Portrait* is a way of prefiguring death. In late work, no artist is concerned directly with death but rather with creating new form—often jagged, disturbing form, and often form that plays stillness against some deep and energetic stirring within the self, as though to emphasize that art is made only by the living.

In Beckett's *Nacht und Träume*, then, the self lives with its dream-self, its shadow-self. In some of Bacon's other late work, the figure, filled with painterly substance, is shadowed by another shape, a shape that has elements of the human form. In *Still Life: Broken Statue and Shadow* (1984), for example, it is interesting to see Bacon confronting the same problem faced by Beckett when dealing with the human presence, the human figure. In some of his late work, Beckett could not see the figure as single or self-contained, or simply moving toward death; instead he saw it as being able to extend beyond its own boundaries, finding what Joseph Conrad called a "secret sharer," even if the secret sharer was just the next sentence.

Bacon in this painting makes the shadow figure more ghostly, stronger in outline than in positive space or texture. It is not a shadow of the statue itself, having a different shape, which suggests that it has its own leftover

presence. It is, oddly, substance as well as shadow.

This happens, too, in a number of other late works by Bacon, such as *Study from the Human Body and Portrait* (1988), in which the face is filled with substance only to give way to the fleshy torso and legs that have less solid presence. And they in turn give way to their own shadow. This happens again in *Figure in Movement* (1978), as the writhing, suffering sexual figure, filled with energy and life, has a shadow almost like something the police might chalk on the pavement at the scene of a crime to mark the outline where a body had been.

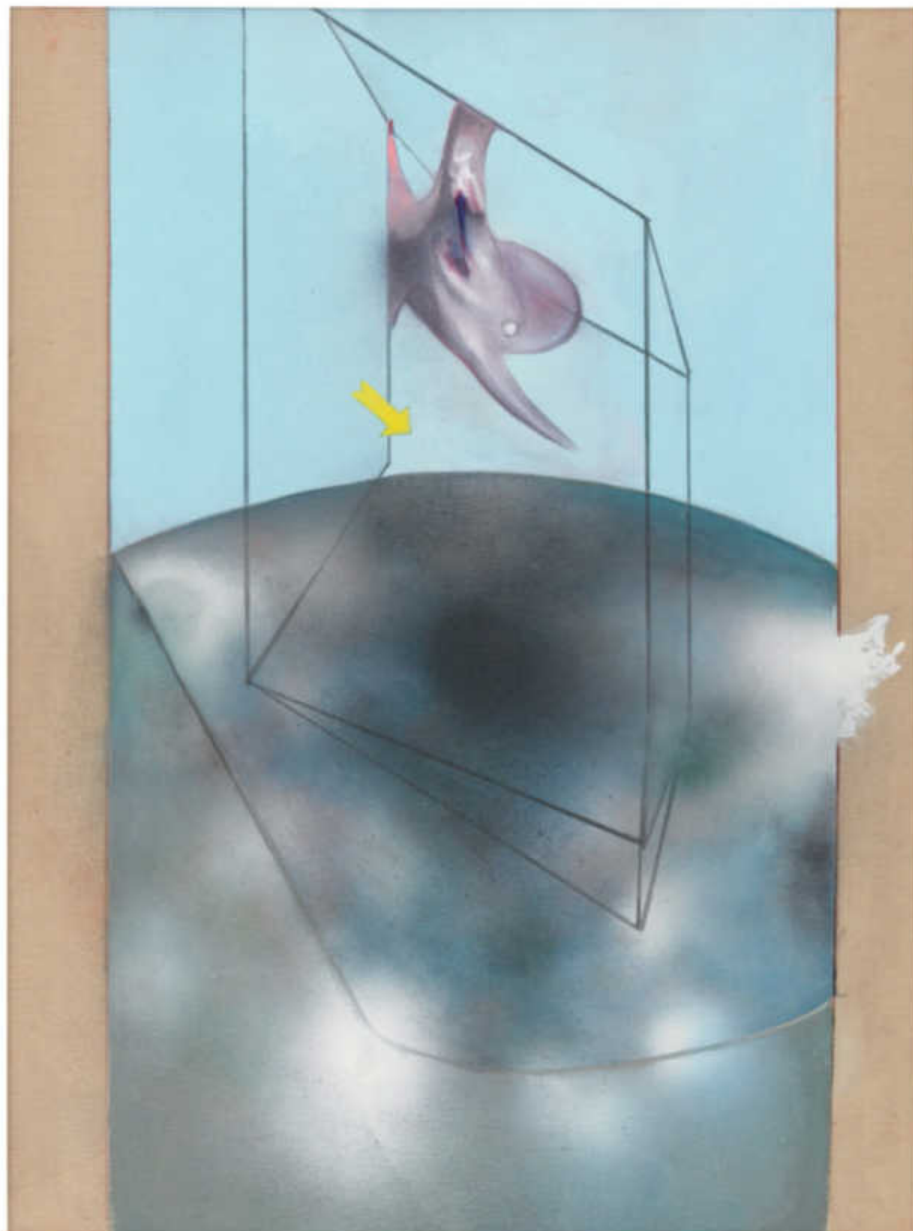
In both Beckett's and Bacon's work, this idea of the figure as fluid rather than, say, single or inert has its origins in necessity as much as in philosophy. There is a sense in the late work of both artists that they are too busy seeing and working with form to be bothered thinking about or burdening us with philosophy. There is something deeply exciting and dramatic about a second self, a figure waiting for the transfer of energy that will allow it to come to life, however flickeringly. Beckett was a dramatist even at his most minimal. He wished to create excitement even at his most restrained. And so he made such doubles. Bacon made clear in interviews how much the very imperatives of image-making mattered to him.

Thus these shadows, this blurring of self, at its most intense and magisterial—for example, in Bacon's *Self-Portrait* of 1987—created a force and energy in the pictures that would strike the nervous system of the viewer more powerfully than any single, stable figure.

It is important to remember that playing with the ghostly or the shadowy, using them to create pictorial mystery and excitement, makes its way through Bacon's entire body of work, just as the idea of a double or an alternate self will appear in earlier Beckett plays such as *Krapp's Last Tape*, written in 1958. So, too, does Yeats use the same sort of clear, chiseled statements of "Cuchulain Comforted" in poems as early as "Adam's Curse," published in 1904. And Mann was interested in parody and trickery throughout his life.

Therefore when we think about late work we need to bear in mind connections as much as distinctions, continuities as much as departures. Nonetheless, if we look at Bacon's *Sand Dune* (1983), *Painting March 1985* (1985), and *Blood on Pavement* (1988), all three filled with mysterious shapes, layers, and presences, hovering toward and then resisting abstraction, set in a sort of aftermath, a place where the body has been, it is possible to feel that Bacon was not content merely to find images that would deepen what he had already done, or would distill his vision, or would totalize it. Instead, there is a restlessness here that we also find in Beethoven's late chamber music—a feeling that Bacon might begin again, that he is searching for some way to make images that he knows will only be possible for artists of the future, if they are even possible at all.

Working is a way, in any case, of keeping such knowledge at bay at least for the time being, a way of confronting the material world, of outfacing it, as though time might actually relent or the spirit might gain more substance than anyone has ever before imagined. □



Francis Bacon: Painting March 1985, 1985; oil on canvas, 78 x 58 1/4 inches

A Very Different Paris

Robert Darnton

The Other Paris

by Luc Sante.
Farrar, Straus and Giroux,
306 pp., \$28.00

All cities have ruts—paths worn by the routines of their inhabitants as they go about their business. Paris is especially rutted, and the Parisians have an expression for the sense of imprisonment that it imposes on them: “*métro, boulot, dodo*” (subway, job, sleep). But there is another Paris, the city inhabited by those who don’t have jobs, either because they can’t find employment or because they have opted out of life in a rut. The marginal, the poor, the eccentrics, the bohemians, the dropouts, and the down-and-outs haunt the pages of Luc Sante’s vivid tour of that other Paris, most of it buried under what remains of the nineteenth century.

Subterranean Paris still exists, some of it inhabited. I have a small apartment in an old building in the second arrondissement. One day, after leaving my bike in the cellar, I decided to explore the subcellars. There were two of them, consisting of caves, filthy and unlit. Groping in the dark, three floors below street level, I stumbled upon a body. I ran up the stairs and out the front door, looking for help. The first person I encountered was a man washing dishes in the kitchen of a restaurant next door. When I shouted through the open window that there was a body in the bottom cellar, he replied calmly, “It’s nothing. He’s our clochard.” I hadn’t known that our apartment building provided a refuge for a homeless man; and after a moment’s reflection, I realized that the “our” used by the dishwasher did not include me or any other apartment owner. It referred to another Paris.

Although it is steeped in history—thoroughly understood and expertly narrated—*The Other Paris* is not a historical study. Nor is it a guidebook, although there exists a genre of “other” guidebooks: *This Other London*, *The Other Side of Rome*, etc. (The genre has especially flourished in German; most European cities have inspired guidebooks beginning *Das andere*...; the earliest *Das andere Paris* dates from 1983, and there is one currently available on YouTube.) Part of the fascination of *The Other Paris* is that it slips between genres. It can best be characterized as a historical-cultural tour of a great city, or *flânerie*, for Luc Sante invokes flâneurs throughout the book and writes as one of them.

According to the ideal type invented by Baudelaire, the flâneur takes in a city by strolling through it. He (Baudelaire did not envision female flâneurs) does not follow a fixed itinerary but rather loses himself in the crowd, swimming wherever its currents take him and letting the cityscape work on his consciousness in unexpected ways. When inspired, flâneurs have produced some important literature. The line of their books extends from the greatest of them all, *Le Tableau de Paris* by Louis-Sébastien Mercier (it grew from two to twelve volumes in successive editions, all of them illegal, between 1781 and 1788),* to Paris

inconnu (1861) by Alexandre Privat d’Anglemont, *Nouvelles promenades dans Paris* (1908) by Georges Cain, *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926) by Louis Aragon, *Le Piéton de Paris* (1939) by Léon-Paul Fargue, *Les Parisiens* (1967) by Louis Chevalier, and *The Streets of Paris* (1980) by Richard Cobb.

Sante has mastered all of this literature and a great deal more. He knows the city thoroughly, and he evokes its spirit in the manner of Cobb, concentrating on its poorest arrondissements and accompanying his text with hundreds

bar—sounds impressive in the mouth of Jean Gabin, but overuse in films and detective stories has turned it into a cliché. The poor were never picturesque. Several generations of social historians have produced a convincing, disabused view of nineteenth-century poverty. They have shown how the population of Paris exploded, how the indigent crowded into slums, went hungry, succumbed to disease (especially devastating waves of cholera), and died in droves with every downturn of the economy. Sante does justice to these themes, but he does not take them far beyond the point where they were left

Georges Pompidou at Beaubourg; the Bibliothèque nationale de France (also known as the Bibliothèque François-Mitterrand), “which looks like a housing project on the moon”; the Bastille Opéra, “which looks like a parking garage”; and above all the Tour Montparnasse, a “giant upended turd.” These projects were not intended to block revolutions, but they express *étatisme*, an assertion of state power, similar to Haussmann’s mauling of Paris in the service of Napoleon III. By serving Charles de Gaulle, Sante argues, Georges Pompidou and André Malraux completed the work of Haussmann and set examples for further devastation in the name of progress. Their monuments proclaim the glory of rulers in a style the French call *pharaonien*.

Sante does not merely object to the architecture. He sees two contending forces in the new cityscape: on one side, “reformers and moralists and commission chairmen”; on the other, “vagrants and eccentrics and clochards.” The former have won, but the latter deserve the recognition of posterity, because they represent a marginal, dissident culture generated from the bottom layers of society.

Put so bluntly, the argument can seem romantic and far-fetched. Sante refrains from making it explicit, preferring to let it show through a dense account of roughly related topics: urban geography, low life and the lower classes, immigrants and street people, disease and death, prostitution, booze, bohemianism, boulevard theaters, popular songs and singers, crime and famous criminals, revolutions and insurgents, feminists and anarchists. The subjects come and go, helter-skelter, blending into one another without adhering to any distinct structure.

The Other Paris has no introduction and conclusion, no central thesis, no discourse on method or discussion of historiography. Instead of announcing an argument and outlining its constituent parts, Sante plunges into his subject and sweeps the reader with him. Without knowing where we are going, we are at his side, inspecting the horrific garbage dump of Montfaucon with 12,000 dead horses. We follow the itineraries of ragpickers and their hopeless stand against municipal trash collection. We wander through flea markets, pausing to examine the inventory of a stand from the 1890s: “Two fragments of Turkish carpet, some bracelets made of hair, a lot of watches and chains in need of repair, three portraits of Napoleon...” Back in the streets of the poorer arrondissements—but as Sante rightly remarks, poverty was vertical before Haussmann: the higher your room, the lower your status—we take in the work of *le business* (prostitution), and we learn what the *horizontales* charged from a menu of their services: “An ordinary hand job cost thirty-three sous, upped to fifty for the additional insertion of the pinky into the anus...”

The details, served up straight with a great deal of offbeat erudition, produce a shock effect, in accordance with a peculiarly French style of provocation: *épater le bourgeois*. It is unset-



‘Hurdy-gurdy man and street singer’; photograph by Eugène Atget, Paris, circa 1898–1899

of illustrations. Unlike the photographs in Cobb’s *The Streets of Paris*, however, the photos in *The Other Paris* have been culled from archives and are often too small and blurred to be decipherable. The book fails as a picture album, but it succeeds marvelously in conjuring up street life, especially lives lived at the outer border of the city (the Zone) and along its many margins—a world inhabited by ragpickers, prostitutes, criminals, street singers, drunks, poets, and the endless varieties of the indigent.

As Sante describes it, it is a world we have lost, and the loss should weigh on the consciousness of anyone who loves the city—not the Paris of conventional guidebooks, or the Paris inhabited by the rich and the powerful (those from the center and the west, particularly the seventh and the sixteenth arrondissements), but the Paris of the poor (those from the east and the north, especially the nineteenth and the twentieth arrondissements), who lived largely in the streets and created a culture of their own. That culture took root at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It bore its last fruit in the 1920s and 1930s, and it is dead today.

This view of the Parisian past can easily veer off into sentimentality. Tough talk by the *titi* with his *gros rouge sur le zinc*—the lower-class native Parisian swearing in slang over cheap wine at a

long ago by Louis Chevalier in *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses à Paris pendant la première moitié du XIXe siècle* (1958).

Instead of imparting original research, Sante invokes the past to indict the present—not the new forms of poverty, compounded by unemployment, racism, and police brutality, in the *banlieues* or outskirts of the city, but rather the general tendency to redesign Paris that began with Baron Georges Haussmann. From 1853 to 1870 Haussmann sliced apart the bodies of old neighborhoods and built the boulevards that are celebrated in the guidebooks of today. Along the way, he improved the city’s hygiene, but his main purpose was to clear a path for troops and to eradicate the threat of insurrection from crowded areas with narrow streets, where the poor built barricades and rose against oppression in 1830, 1832, 1834, 1839, and 1848. The story of Haussmannization has been told often, sometimes sympathetically, as in David Jordan’s *Transforming Paris: The Life and Labors of Baron Haussmann* (1995). Sante breathes new life into it, not merely with vivid prose but also by pointing it in a new direction.

The spirit of Haussmann, he argues, can be read in the urban projects that have disfigured Paris since World War II: the disappearance of Les Halles, the city’s central food market, replaced by a soulless, subterranean shopping center; the “aggressively repellent” Centre

Claude Bonnet, two volumes (Paris: Mercure de France, 1994).

*A superb modern edition is available: *Tableau de Paris*, edited by Jean-

ting for anyone located safely in the middle class to wander into the world of the poor, even vicariously by reading about those who died a century ago. Sante evokes that world so well that his success as a writer poses a danger for the reader: voyeurism. *Flânerie* can degenerate into slumming.

Sante acknowledges the peril of “a voyeuristic fascination with other people’s miseries.” To avoid it, he adopts the hard-boiled tone used in some detective stories: don’t expect any sentiment, reader; you’re getting nothing but the facts. Yet he lets his own sympathies show through. In a chapter on crime, he rejects all “honor-loyalty-virility guff,” and he notes that by 1830 crime had become a threat to the ordinary poor. But in stringing together anecdotes about famous murderers, prison escapes, shoot-outs, and executions, he presents the underworld as a vital aspect of life at the bottom of society. Criminality and poverty—*la pègre* and *les pauvres*—grew together symbiotically in the slums.

Sante does not go as far as Balzac and Hugo in imagining “an organized alternative society” among the criminals, but like Eric Hobsbawm he treats crime as social banditry. Robbery and murder appear as a form of rebellion against authority, not altogether different from fighting at the barricades. Sante describes famous crimes as “one-person insurrections,” and he writes short biographies of the most notorious criminals: Eugène François Vidocq, Pierre-François Lacenaire, Jean-Jacques Liabeuf, and Jacques Mesrine. They make fascinating reading, but what do they add up to?

Not an argument that crime fed into revolution. While preying on the poor, some criminals collaborated with the Gestapo. Others, to be sure, provided material for novels with a revolutionary message, above all *Les Misérables*, but they appear in all kinds of literature and appealed to all sectors of the political spectrum. They might best be understood as a staple of urban folklore. Sante favors that view in a short discussion of detective stories, which he treats as prime material for gaining access to the “Parisian imagination,” and even its “subconscious.” But the reading public of the *série noire* was not particularly proletarian. The frissons provided by penny dreadfuls went down many bourgeois spines, and it is difficult to detect a distinctly popular element in the literature that is commonly identified with popular culture. Can that literature be construed as a protest aimed against the oppressive, state-driven attempt to impose order on unruliness? I don’t think so.

That question hangs over Sante’s discussion of boulevard theater and cabaret music. He knows the subject inside out, and he regales the reader with mini-biographies of show people from Aristide Bruant to Édith Piaf. Far from warming over clichés about the wicked ways of Montmartre, he conveys the idiom of street singers who made names for themselves on the boulevards. He has an impressive mastery of Parisian slang along with the skill to translate it into English. He evokes “the quintessential sound of Paris” by showing how immigrants from Au-

vergne supplemented the accordion with the musette, a small, high-pitched bagpipe. He points to the seditious character of some popular songs, which were purged by censors under the Second Empire. Yet the *bal-musette* and *café concert* drew mixed audiences, and a few of their greatest stars favored the far right. Eugénie Buffet, the first *chanteuse réaliste*, sang for workers but supported the anti-Dreyfusards and the opponents of the Popular Front.

The difficulty of connecting politics with popular culture emerges most clearly in the chapter entitled “Insurgents,” where Sante confronts the phenomenon of revolution. It follows the chapter on crime and criminal literature and therefore poses a question: What is the relation of street violence to political upheaval? Passing from a discussion of *faits divers* (mainly anecdotes about murders in the popular press), the reader plunges into great events: 1789, 1830, 1848, 1871. The Commune brings the series to a climax. Sante tells the story well, although he cannot attempt anything comparable to the narrative of the most recent study, John Merriman’s superb *Massacre: The Life and Death of the Paris Commune* (2014). Sante does justice to the horrors of repression and the reactions to it, which set the course of radical agitation for the rest of the century. Then he ends the chapter with a long account of murders and robberies by the Bonnot gang, a group of anarchists who shot up large parts of Paris in 1911 and 1912.

What is the common ground of all these subjects? Metaphorically at least, the streets of Paris. In his final chapter, Sante explains that one can stroll

through the city as if one were playing a board game, the traditional *jeu de l’oie*, which leads from square to square, each one evoking an experience. In this fashion, the flaneur can call up spirits from the past, those attached to what remains of the city destroyed by Haussmann and the modern urban planners. It’s a game of chance, which exposes the player to surprises and spontaneity. Instead of following a laid-out route, the flaneur chases unexpected associations along paths that Sante calls *dérives*.

He takes this idea from Guy Debord, the author of *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) and the prophet of the Situationist International, a leftist movement that inspired many of the student revolutionaries in May–June 1968. In his last chapter, Sante pays tribute to Debord as the last in the line that leads from the Communards through anarchism, Dada, and Surrealism to “the fever dream of May ’68.” Not that Sante sees straight lines in history or advocates a revival of the 1960s. He finds inspiration in Debord’s vision of Paris as a collection of “ambience units” or zones determined by the accumulated experience of their inhabitants.

The Other Paris is an attempt to encompass the city in this manner. Each of its chapters can be read as a *dérive*. The last stand of the Communards in the Cimetière du Père Lachaise flashes by along with sketches by Toulouse-Lautrec and graffiti such as “*Mort aux Vaches*” (Death to the Cops). The book streams before the eyes like a film, and that makes it a very good read. It succeeds in what it sets as its goal, not to straighten out history, but to help the reader apprehend an endlessly fascinating city. □



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Ambush, Night & Day

Julian Lucas

A Brief History of Seven Killings

by Marlon James.
Riverhead, 688 pp.,
\$28.95; \$17.00 (paper)

If hell were a place on earth, a Bob Marley concert in Jamaica isn't the first place you'd expect to find it. But perspective is everything. Bam-Bam, the first character to die in Marlon James's new novel, has been running for two days when he reaches the show, held in the park where he sleeps. He is covered in dog spit, desperate for cocaine, and relentlessly pursued by his partners in a failed assassination. The crowd around him is moving to the "Positive Vibration," but Bam-Bam is alone, hemmed in by nightmarish visions. Invisible flames lick at his ankles, three-eyed, bat-winged babies swarm around his head, and ghostly "duppies," the revenant spirits of Caribbean folklore, take aim at him from trees. But more frightening still is the man he tried to murder, not only still alive, but before him on stage—a Rasta Orpheus, risen from the grave. Marley's lyrics crash down upon him like damnation: "So Jah say."

Bam-Bam is the author's invention, but the concert really happened. "Smile Jamaica," held on December 5, 1976, in Kingston's National Heroes Park, was one of the biggest shows Marley ever gave, a turning point in his life and the history of the island. It was a peace concert organized by Michael Manley, Jamaica's socialist prime minister, in the lead-up to a nasty, violent election. The two parties were skirmishing over swing districts in West Kingston—lawless ghettos that they controlled using posses of local gunmen. The situation was especially crucial because of what Marley called the "ism schism," and which most people know as the cold war. Afraid that Manley's Jamaica might become another Cuba, the CIA provided the opposition Jamaica Labour Party with weapons and training. What is called in patois *hataclaps* ensued.

More than seventy people died in the resulting violence, which reached the world's ears when it almost killed Bob Marley, the country's most famous citizen. On December 3, gunmen stormed his Hope Road residence and recording studio, shooting him, his manager, his wife Rita, and members of his band. Everyone survived the attack—which inspired the song "Ambush in the Night"—and Marley gave a legendary performance only two days later. But he was shaken enough to leave Jamaica for England, where he would stay for most of the rest of his life. The gunmen were never captured.

And you almost have to be glad they got away. If they hadn't, Marlon James might never have written his grisly and mesmerizing new book. *A Brief History of Seven Killings* is a glittering slice of Gehenna, something Roberto Bolaño might have written after watching the Jamaican film *The Harder They Come* with Hieronymus Bosch. A merciless, many-voiced epic, it is less a crime

novel than a meditation on violence—on the way it feels to those who live it, and the way it spreads in the world. You won't find much of the sunny Marley of "One Love" in this story. (Or, for that matter, much Bob Marley—"The Singer," as James obliquely names him, is essentially a plot device.) *Seven Killings* is more like "Concrete Jungle"—a spiraling groove of crime and violence that reverberates from 1970s Kingston to 1990s Miami and New York.

The novel picks up where the record leaves off, beginning with the Hope



Marlon James at Jumel Terrace Books, Sugar Hill, Harlem, September 2014

Road gunmen and their brief, desperate lives. These characters are invented, but the frame of the story is real crime history. The gunmen belong to an organization based on the Shower Posse, a Kingston group that started in local political enforcement, then graduated to the international drug trade. Their leader, Lester Lloyd Coke, inspired the novel's lead antagonist, the crime lord Josey Wales. But all this international intrigue is secondary—background for the lives of people caught up in it.

Among them are people like Nina Burgess, a middle-class woman who flees Kingston after the gunmen see her witness the attack. *Seven Killings* follows Nina out of Jamaica and across four assumed identities—a picaresque exile that takes her, among other places, to Manhattan, where the "God Bless Employment Agency" hires her to nurse the aging parents of rich New Yorkers. (One client greets her by saying, "You must be the new girl they hired to wipe my ass.") At the periphery of the action, Nina is like the gravedigger in *Hamlet*—a character whose bitter humor both relieves and reflects the violence of the larger story. She laughs because she can't stop looking over her shoulder, anticipating the day the gunmen might arrive. "Even if it never comes," she explains, "the point is I'll be waiting for it."

It isn't any easier for the gunmen. They, too, are running away. The one who gets closest to freedom is the complex and ruthless Weeper. Weeper, who

likes to read Bertrand Russell and plans to go to school, is swept up in a police raid while still an adolescent. Locked up, electrically tortured, and sexually abused, he emerges from prison Josey Wales's protégé and the posse's most capable enforcer. But the trauma follows him for two decades and all the way to New York, where Josey Wales puts him in charge of cocaine distribution. There, he glimpses the possibility of another life. He cruises the East Village for sex with young men, one of whom he begins to care for. In one of the novel's only tender scenes, Weeper lies in bed admiring this man, wonder-

force, like gravity, that lurks in every curve of space. Uptown or Downtown, Boogeydown or Jamdown, you can't really get away from it, something Bam-Bam captures in a description of the Kingston ghetto where he grew up. He pictures it as a shadow with a moving edge, lengthening more quickly than he can get away:

And the little room get smaller and smaller and more sisterbrothercousin come from country, the city getting bigger and bigger and there be no place to rub-a-dub or cut you shit and no chicken back to curry and even when there is it still cost too much money and that little girl get stab because they know she get lunch money every Tuesday and the boys like me getting older and not in school very regular and can't read Dick and Jane but know Coca-Cola, and want to go to a studio and cut a tune and sing hit songs and ride the riddim out of the ghetto but Copenhagen City and the Eight Lanes both too big and every time you reach the edge, the edge move ahead of you like a shadow until the whole world is a ghetto, and you wait.

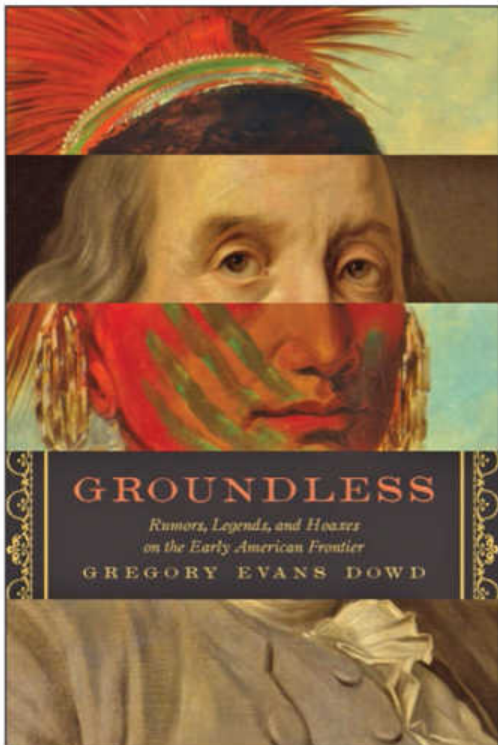
A Brief History of Seven Killings advances with this shadow's edge—cutting, with depth and precision, into violence and its inner worlds. It has less in common with most recent literary fiction than it does with *Breaking Bad* and *The Wire*. (And it may soon join their com-

pany—HBO optioned an adaptation of the novel in April.) Like these shows, *Seven Killings* is surprising, suspenseful, and, when it stirs from its sinister languor, fast, with action sequences as finger-curling and eyelid-lifting as anything onscreen. But as much as it resembles the best of today's television, the novel conveys violence with an interior nuance perhaps only achievable in prose. Its intensity comes less from the story's underworld glamour than it does from James's style and syntax—a language that gives texture to danger and its psychic terrain.

Few shows or films can match the intensity of *Seven Killings'* unworldly death scenes, rapturously long and so well executed that you might suspect James of having gone through the experience. One character, executed by the posse, narrates his own live burial in the first person, delivering a long monologue that ends, chillingly, with "ring around the rosie"—a regression to childhood that completes his inner unraveling.

The novel has many such spectacular deaths, as well as gunfights, car chases, and interrogations. But it is more concerned with the ordinary ways that violence is lived. James brings this out in the novel's narrating voices—a taxonomy of ways the mind copes with danger and death. There's the ruminant gravity of Papa-Lo, oldest don in the ghetto, whose proverb-strewn meditations retreat from the streets he no longer knows how to control. Or

Carolyn Cole/Los Angeles Times



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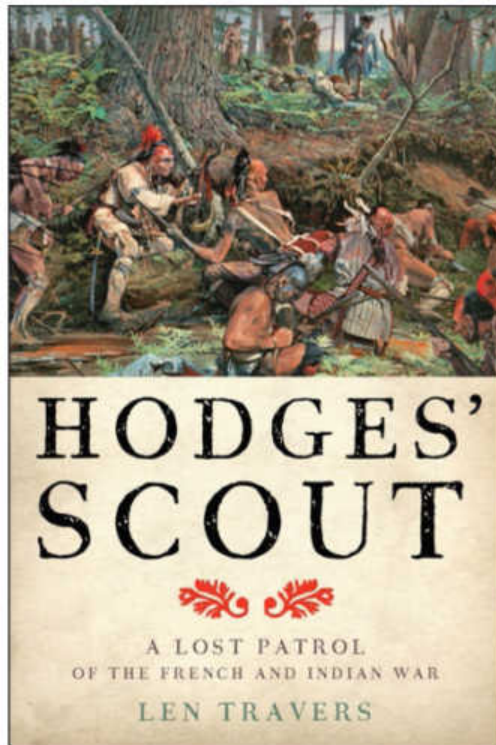
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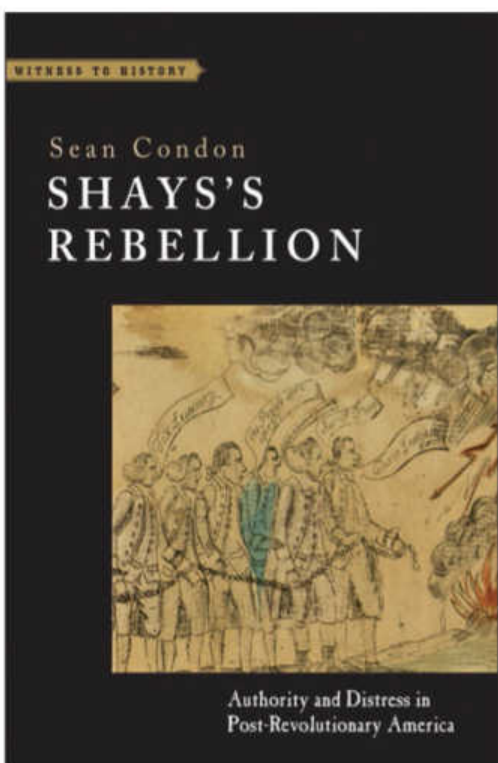
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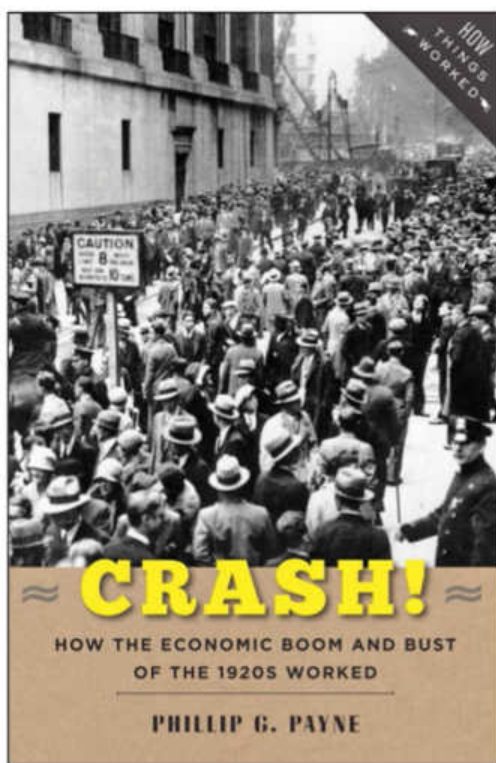
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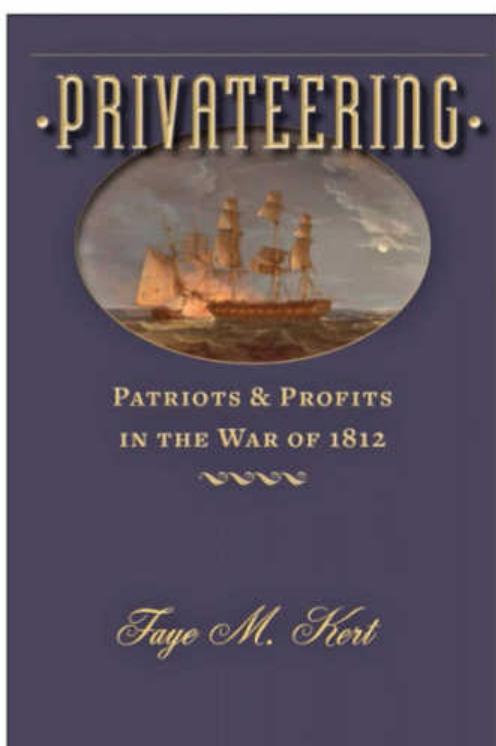
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the psychopathic alertness of Josey Wales, a crime lord so prudent that he remembers secrets by setting them to nursery rhymes in his head. (It would be too dangerous, he explains, to write anything down—"Bad man don't make note in a book.") Or the thin machismo of Barry DiFlorio, the CIA station chief for Jamaica, in over his head and anxious about ending up like the embassy hostages in Iran.

Some of these voices are stronger than others. But such unevenness is probably inevitable in a novel with more than a dozen narrators, the best of whom cling to the ear with an intimacy that is almost parasitic. They sound almost unbearably close, like a record with all the reverb removed. What makes this work is James's talent for ventriloquizing vulnerability—to speak from his characters' sense of their own mortality. The novel is written with an unstinting awareness of death, most explicitly present in the story's surreal beginning. Sir Arthur George Jennings, a murdered politician, narrates the prologue from hell. There, the violence of death replays itself forever, and the only freedom left is observation: "Living people wait and see because they fool themselves that they have time. Dead people see and wait."

Marlon James is no Dante, but he shares at least three things with the author of the *Divine Comedy*. He artfully blends fantasy and nonfiction, writes unapologetically in his regional patois, and is fixated on hell—less as a literal location than as a way of illustrating how malice and violence entangle human

lives. He has published three novels, all set in Jamaica. The first, *John Crow's Devil* (2005), is a supernatural thriller, the story of two ministers warring over a backcountry village called Gibbeah. It begins when the devilishly handsome "Apostle" arrives in the town's church and dramatically ejects the "Rum Preacher," its drunken, unloved minister. Once installed, the Apostle leads his flock the way of ISIS, drawing the whole village into a murderous, fundamentalist frenzy.

The Book of Night Women (2009) has the same spiraling shape. Set in the eighteenth century on the huge Montpelier plantation, the story is centered on a slave girl named Lilith. Around the time she comes of age, Lilith kills a man who tries to rape her, setting off a chain of violence that upends Montpelier and earns her an invitation from the "night women": a secretive group of rebel slaves steeped in the Caribbean spiritual traditions of *myal* and *obeah*. What unfolds from there may be the most graphic slavery fiction ever printed—a merciless modern update of plantation gothic with an almost unbearably gory ending.

You can see the view of violence in *Seven Killings* emerging in these two novels. But they are nowhere near as good. Brilliant at points, and certainly never boring, they sometimes veer off into monotonous pornography—pile-ups of carnage that disrupt the tension of the narrative. The violence in *Seven Killings* isn't easier or more tasteful—and it shouldn't be. But it is so much more artfully paced and placed that it puts the novel in a different class, less a spectacle than a revealing illustration of the characters' lives.

Perhaps this has to do with the way the story is told. *John Crow's Devil* and *The Book of Night Women* are narrated by outsiders to the action—spectators or collective eyes that put the reader in the same position, relative to the spectacle of violence, as a mob. But *Seven Killings* is a first-person panorama, giving many intimate angles on its dangerous world. We see, feel, and suffer Kingston with the young rudies, the old rudies, the Uptowners, the corrupt politicians, the CIA, and even the reporter on assignment from *Rolling Stone*. The overall effect is close to *The Wire*'s group-by-group, top-to-bottom view of Baltimore.

If television shows keep offering themselves as comparisons, it is perhaps because *Seven Killings* goes so much against the grain of what is generally considered, at least in America, to be literary. It is driven by plot and voice, rather than what Elif Batuman mocks, in the introduction to her essay collection *The Possessed* (2010), as the "ideal of 'craft'"—a cultish compulsion toward observation and detail that turns much contemporary fiction into "a nearly unreadable core of brisk verbs and vivid nouns." The novel is also a kind of social encyclopedia, its many voices a catalog of its place and time.

Both of these qualities are at once strangely of the moment, and somehow old-fashioned—cable drama, but also nineteenth-century serial. Indeed, James told *Guernica* that the first set of novels he read seriously were Victorian: "Lots and lots and lots of Dickens. And Dickens is, 'Make them laugh, make them cry, make them wait.'"

And, perhaps, make them hurt. Violence has become the norm in American film and television; it is less evident in our literary fiction. Our entertainment and our politics rely on the spectacle of violence, yet we rarely consider the lived experience. This omission is related to the domestic bent of most literary fiction—which still considers the ironies, insecurities, and understated epiphanies of "ordinary" (white, comfortable, first-world) lives the most appropriate subjects of artful writing. Anything more intense tends to get banished to a subliterate setting.

Which isn't to say that violent fiction is rare. What's rare is fiction that is actually about violence, concerned not so much with how it strikes the witness (with pity, pleasure, or political outrage, for example) but with how it feels. And *Seven Killings* is fearlessly faithful to that experience, written as though with indifference to its readers' arousal, outrage, sympathy, and disgust. For James, this is as much a moral as an artistic choice. "I have a problem with understated violence," he told *Guernica*. "I know people who have suffered from violence and there's nothing tasteful or beautifully written or wonderfully wrought about it." Readers "cannot get off easy," or look down as though from above the story. "You don't get to have a bigger sense of

perspective than [the characters] do," he goes on. "Because they don't get it, so why should you get it?"

There is a wicked parody in *Seven Killings* of this "bigger sense of perspective" in the character of Alex Pierce. A *Rolling Stone* writer who comes to Jamaica to report on Mick Jagger's vacation, he ends up investigating the gunmen who ambushed Marley at Hope Road. A would-be narrator, Pierce can't stay out of the story. It follows him all the way to New York, where enforcers of the Storm Posse invade his apartment. There, in a macabre amplification of every writer's nightmare, Pierce is tied up and "edited" by the gunmen of a crackhouse shooting he is covering for *The New Yorker*. Tied up, pants wet, and teeth broken, Pierce takes line-by-line criticism from subjects who truly have "jumped off the page." In one of the novel's darkest moments of humor, the gunmen object to Pierce's racist description of a woman their don has killed:

—Why you have to describe her so ghetto?

—Huh? I don't unders—

—Short, chubby, and I remember the rest, "dark with hair that looked like the extensions were just removed." What the fuck, white boy, you think she going like to read that?

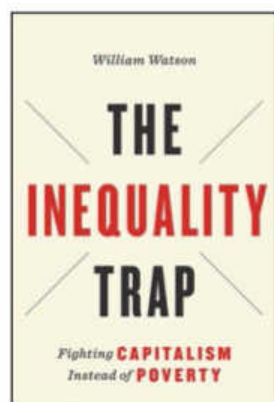
So it goes for anyone who thinks they stand beyond the story. And if you read it right, *Seven Killings* will leave you exactly where it leaves Alex Pierce—struck, at close range, by lives you expected to see from a distance. It will hit different readers according to what they expect from violence in fiction—if anything at all. Some will be frustrated by its lack of "larger comment," the usual hall pass for dangerous art. Others will find it too painful. People who think good writing should always be graceful won't like it at all.

But to make certain things beautiful would be to lie about them—something one character, Tristan Phillips, discovers in the Riker's Island prison library. There, he reads V. S. Naipaul's *The Middle Passage*, a book much denounced for its contemptuous representation of the author's native Caribbean. But Tristan finds something to agree with:

Brethren, the man say West Kingston is a place so fucking bad that you can't even take a picture of it, because the beauty of the photographic process lies to you as to just how ugly it really is. Oh you read it? Trust me, even him have it wrong. The beauty of how him write that sentence still lie to you as to how ugly it is. It so ugly it shouldn't produce no pretty sentence, ever.

There are plenty of pretty sentences in Marlon James's new novel. But it refuses to be beautiful. Not because it can't, but because certain extremes of human experience ask for something else. □

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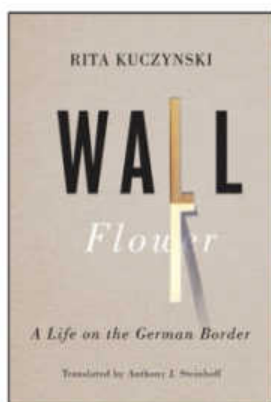


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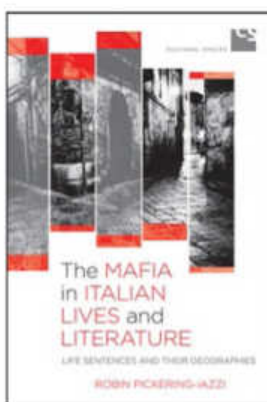


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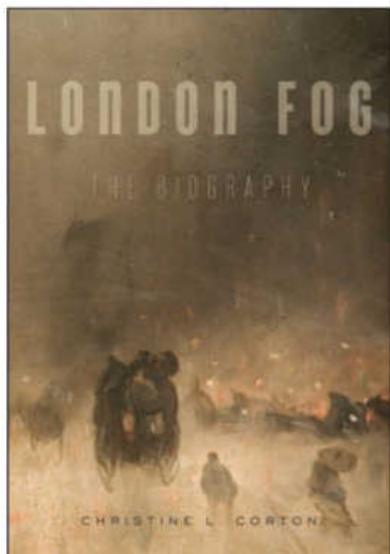
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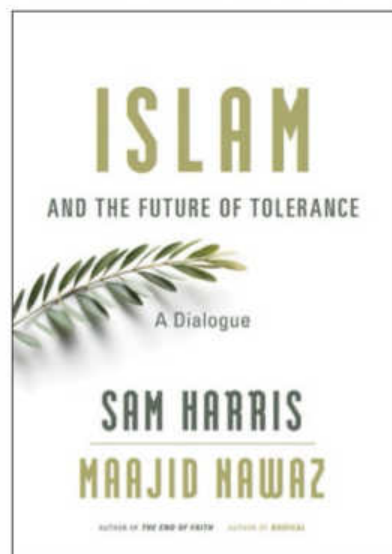
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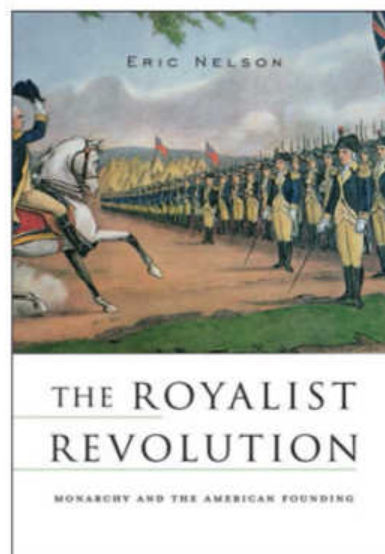
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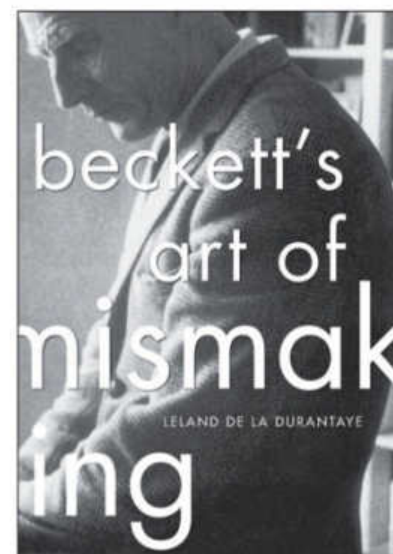
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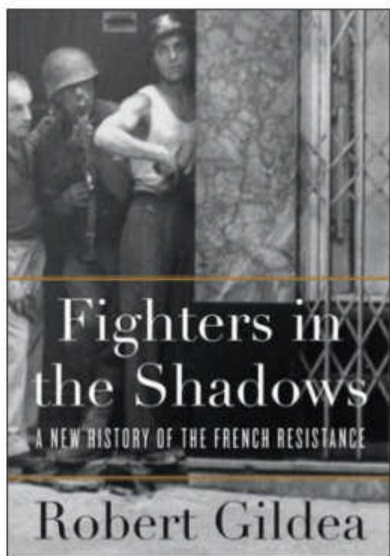


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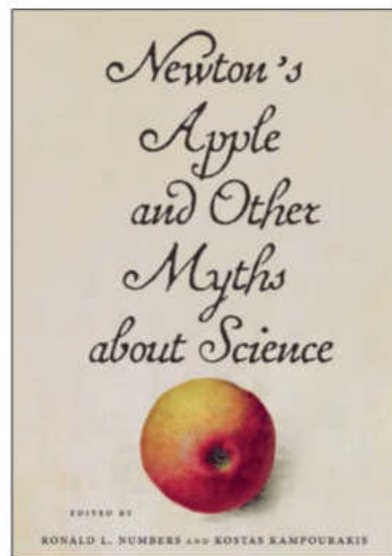
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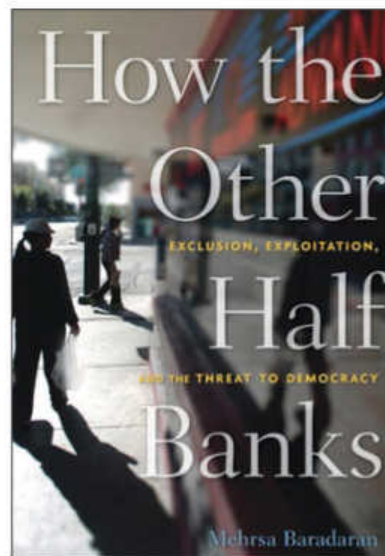


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EDITED BY **Ronald L. Numbers • Kostas Kampourakis**

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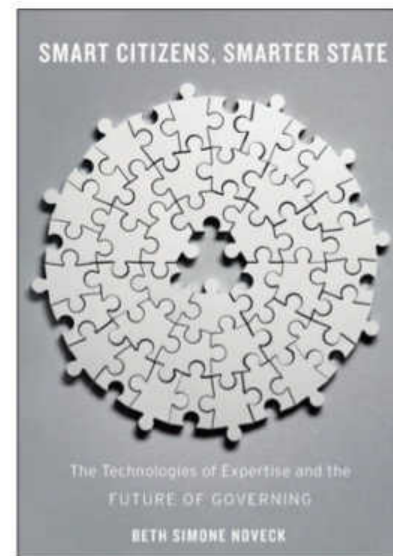
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‘His Joy, His Life’

Stacy Schiff

Letters to Véra

by Vladimir Nabokov, edited and translated from the Russian by Olga Voronina and Brian Boyd. Knopf, 794 pp., \$40.00

Nabokov in America: On the Road to Lolita

by Robert Roper. Bloomsbury, 354 pp., \$28.00

When he mailed the first missive to the woman who would become his wife, Vladimir Nabokov was a penurious, Berlin-based poet known to the émigré community as “V. Sirin,” a name that felt more familiar to him than his own. He dreamed still of Russia. When he mailed his last letter, he was a wealthy American novelist living in Switzerland, self-conscious about the quality of his Russian. In between came a shelf of literature, three wrenching changes of country, and nearly fifty years of marriage. It was the longest-running, most intimate correspondence of Nabokov’s life, in part because his wife quickly came to handle most others. Her husband had, she explained to William Maxwell when he phoned in 1964 on *New Yorker* business, a “communicatory neurosis.”

She molted too, from the fictional Mme Bertran, a code name she assumed in Berlin to disguise herself from Nabokov’s family, to the marble, monumental Véra Nabokov of Montreux. Both had been “perfectly normal trilingual children” in St. Petersburg, where their paths crossed but never intersected. When finally they met, in their early twenties, in Germany, Nabokov believed destiny had arranged the encounter. Their union felt to him preordained, a point he made by summoning an image from *The Count of Monte Cristo*. He mangled it a bit; he generally felt himself beyond language, illiterate, clumsy on the page when it came to Véra Evseevna Slonim. “I can’t tell you anything in words,” wailed the greatest prose stylist of the twentieth century. He knew a fairy tale when he saw one. He was a man deeply in love.

Enchanted by Véra’s lightness, laugh, and “unique charm,” her “stretchy vowels,” “sweet long legs,” and “little dachshund paws”—he did not mention the pages of his verse that she had committed to memory—he poured out his heart. He needed her desperately. He could not write a word without hearing it in her pronunciation. He could not wait for her to read his pages. She understood his every comma. “All the happiness of the world, the riches, power and adventures, all the promises of religions, all the enchantment of nature and even human fame” could not equal, he swore in 1925, two of her letters.

Very quickly she began to color his writing. A pleasure of any extended collection of correspondence lies in the savory anticipations; we read for the shimmer of the future, to which we alone are privy. Vladimir and Véra had known each other for seven months when he invited her to move to America with him. He could offer “a sunny, simple happiness—and not an altogether common one,” a promise on which he largely delivered. “Your father,” he informed her in 1926, a year after their



Véra and Vladimir Nabokov, Berlin, 1934; photograph by Nicolas Nabokov

marriage, “finds that I ‘specialize in risqué subjects.’” All would happen precisely as the couple envisioned, if not remotely on schedule.

And Nabokov found the means to express the “cirrus-cumulus sensations” that would produce what he always referred to, needed to think of as, a cloudless marriage. Within months of their 1923 meeting, Véra was his joy, his life, his music, his love. She was also his kittykin, his poochums, his mousikins, goosikins, monkeykins, sparrowling, kidlet—since he was not keeping a list he feared he might be repeating himself (he was); he worried he would run out of critters (he did not)—his skunky, his bird of paradise, his mothling, kittycat, roosterkin, mousie, tigercubkin.

Through the 1920s he wrote to her of his admiration for *Madame Bovary*, of the color of snow, of Lenin’s death, about that quack Freud, the half-eaten chocolate in his hand, Longfellow, the yapping of a dog with a tail like a French horn, the rasp of his palm on his unshaved face (it sounded like a car braking), about—it was Nabokov in a nutshell—his fear of the post office, the etymology of the word “tennis,” the “thunderstormy tension that’s the harbinger of a poem.” He omitted no detail of his ablutions, his tailoring, his tennis game, his diet (there would appear to be an unheralded link between cold cuts and literary genius), in part because she made it easy for him to do so. Before a 1926 separation, Véra supplied her husband with a block of dated pages. “My darling,” he reminded her near the end of the first month apart, as he faithfully and exuberantly worked his way through the notepad, “I am the only Russian émigré in Berlin who writes to his wife every day.”

He was needling her. As if gathering her strength for the lifetime of paper-work ahead, Véra proved a disappointing correspondent. “Don’t you find our

conversation somewhat...one-sided?” Nabokov wondered in 1924. He had been tempted to mail her a blank sheet of paper with a question mark in the middle but hated to waste the stamp. “My beloved insecticle,” he reminded his wife two years later, “today, by my count, I’m writing my hundredth page to you. And yours will make up no more than ten or so. Is this amiable?” He estimated that he had generated 80 percent of their correspondence. “You write disgustingly rarely to me,” he observed, sounding what was to become a half-century-long refrain.

In the end all of the correspondence would be his. Somewhere along the line, Véra’s letters disappeared. Dmitri Nabokov maintained that his mother—pathologically private, and well aware who the writer in the household was—destroyed them, although there is no evidence that she did so. It is just as likely that their recipient misplaced them; he was a man in whose hands telephone numbers evaporated, who could lose a book of matches in a tiny room, who might entrust his return ticket to the train conductor. We are left to reconstruct the object of Nabokov’s affection entirely from his side of the correspondence.

For all his sense of predestination—for all the rivers waiting for Véra’s reflection, the roads for her steps—theirs was not a marriage of similar minds. He effuses; he swoons; he levitates. She tugs him a little back to earth. He concocts a plan for the two of them to escape for a spell to Biarritz; his “long bird of paradise with the precious tail” does not think visas or funds will allow it. “Try not to look at this as if it were myth,” Vladimir rebukes Véra, a year into their marriage, although he is himself unable to crack the thorny riddle: “How can we get 500 marks?”

For the most part he appreciates her “silly, practical thoughts” and indulges

her moods. “Try to be cheery when I come back,” he begged in 1942 from wintertime St. Paul, “(but I love you when you’re low, too).” He is cross with her only when she describes a butterfly as “yellow.” “There are,” rails the man who would hold that he often reproduced Véra’s picture “by some mysterious means of reflected color in the inner mirrors of my books,” who splashed prisms across the page, “a million shades of yellow.”

For once happiness writes in iridescent color. Togetherness does not; it is an irony of the Nabokovs’ lives that we owe most of their correspondence to financial hardship. After Hurricane Lolita swept through in 1958, delivering them from all such concerns, we have, properly speaking, only eight letters. The earlier gems for the most part date from the trip Nabokov took as a farmhand shortly after the two met; to his 1925 turn as a traveling companion; to the 1942 proto-Pnin circuit of the American South, as a lecturer, when he was still shaking off the urge to write in Russian, when briefly he allows himself to mourn his loss, having traded his mother tongue for a language that “is an illusion and an ersatz.”

In 1936 and 1937 Nabokov traveled to Paris, to which most of the Russian émigré community had then gravitated. The idea was to cultivate literary contacts, deliver some paid readings, ultimately to remove his family from Hitler’s Germany. (By that point they were a family of three, Dmitri having been born, silently in these pages, in the spring of 1934.) Nabokov had been plotting a Parisian move since late 1932. “We will rewrite *Despair*,” he promised Véra, “and in January we will move here.” The translation was made. The move was not.

Four years later, with a greater sense of urgency, he returned to France. Véra remained his angel and his enchantment but the quotidian asphyxiates the endearments. Might she file the papers for an American copyright? What should he talk about with a British editor? Should he buy a butterfly net? Which of the Russian works should he translate next? He tried out some lines and submitted embryonic ideas, along with pleas for razor blades. From La Rotonde, a coffee at his elbow, he reported that he was the toast of Russian Paris. On the one hand, he floated in “a syrup of compliments.” On the other, he railed against the “concentric whirlwinds” in which he lived. “I was absolutely not made for the colourful life here,” he griped, the more so as it left him without the ballast of his writing hours. To save money he accepted all dinner invitations. (He is not as superior as he will sound in *Speak, Memory*. The morbid dislike of Parisian restaurants would come later.) The letters are studded with proper names; he seems to have visited with the entire emigration.

And he missed his wife. He was “furiously bored,” miserable, enervated without her. He had no one to whom he could complain. By April, after eleven weeks apart, the separation had become a torture. He could endure

Dominique Nabokov Archives

it no longer: “Without the air which comes from you I can neither think nor write,” Nabokov grumbled. In the same letter he admitted that he had shared passages of her recent letter with two friends. “They said they understood now who writes my books for me,” he added. He hoped she was flattered.

The Berlin-bound reports—Véra later claimed her husband wrote her daily if not twice a day in 1937, although the evidence here suggests he did so several times a week—could hardly have been more illuminating. They also obscured, like windshield wipers hauling snow in one direction to smear slush in the other. Nabokov dreamed of Véra; he walked about “in a sort of cloud of tenderness” toward her; he loved her beyond words. He shared every detail of his existence save—Find What the Husband Has Hidden—for one.

Véra had her suspicions. As from different cities the couple plotted their German exit, she balked and stalled. If he said France, she said Italy. She hatched a sudden plan to visit his mother in Czechoslovakia. The arrangements were complicated by the couple’s statelessness; he ran about attempting to arrange the necessary paperwork. It was diabolical. If, as Nabokov observed in *Speak, Memory*, documentation constituted “a Russian’s placenta,” he was thrice-born. “The more I think about it and consult with others the more ridiculous your plans seems,” he scolded in March 1937.

If she had listened to him, he chided two weeks later, they would already be sitting in the south of France. He had only been accurate and precise. Why, he demanded, “these repeated and pointless confusions”? Their cor-

respondence had devolved into a series of petty bureaucratic reports, he noted, adding that he adored her all the same and that the delay drove him crazy. He conceded defeat at the end of April; he no longer had the strength to continue their “long-distance chess game.” For the first and only time the Nabokovs spent May 8—the anniversary of the day they had met—apart.

As Nabokov would later say of Sirin’s sentences, there was something “clear but weirdly misleading” about the 1937 correspondence. While floating in a cloud of tenderness for his wife, Nabokov had since February been walking about in the “delicious daze of adultery.” As he assured Véra that he loved her beyond words, he was assuring her rival that he loved her more than anything on earth. He would deny the affair in Prague, where the couple were reunited in May, and from which he continued to post anguished letters to his lover. He would admit to it only weeks later in the south of France, as he continued the extramarital correspondence. He could not live without his new love; he had never known such longing. At the same time, he could not extricate himself from the marriage. It made for a miserable summer. From it came *The Gift*, Nabokov’s last novel in Russian and in his estimation his best, a novel that has been described as his ode to fidelity. By far the most appealing woman in his fiction, its heroine in nearly all ways resembles Véra.

In his diary we expect to meet a writer in his rhetorical all-together. In his correspondence he assumes a persona,

though not so much of a disguise that we fail to recognize him; the letters are more like CAT scans than biopsies. We read them less for the tingle down the spine than to glimpse where the writer and his ideas came from, to learn what they cost him, for the yearnings and misgivings, the false starts and the familiar sparks. How does the Nabokov of *Letters to Véra* compare to the Nabokov of *Speak, Memory* or of the 1989 *Selected Letters*, a volume in which many of the greatest hits here appear?

He is as ever allergic to pomposity, pretension, vulgarity, though not above sharing a dirty joke. He is either socially inept or he artfully masquerades as such. (“I feel myself a cretin in cunning human connections,” he would claim in 1939; two decades later, he was socially “a cripple.”) Already he blasted mediocrities like Stendhal. He is a good gossip. He sounds unmistakably like himself, if without the polish, the mandarin disdain, the stage-managing. The jewels skitter helter-skelter across the page, from an émigré’s “stoop-shouldered speech” to a 3:00 AM encounter with a “very hungry, very lonely, very professional mosquito,” to a “waiter sweating hailstones,” the precursor to the broken-down deodorant under the arms of exam-tackling Cornellians. He rarely misses the “dimple of sunshine on the cheek of the day.” Already in 1939 he has enunciated the theory that would inform so much of the literature: second readings alone counted.

An exile, goes the saying, is a refugee with a library; Nabokov was an exile with a dictionary. (His *New Yorker* editor assumed he had learned his

English directly from the *OED*.) Naturally there is less pedantry and more tenderness in the correspondence with Véra, but the strong opinions and lacquered images are in place well before the Russian poet dashed into the phone booth to emerge as an American novelist. There are surprises along the way. For a man thrice ambushed by history, Nabokov evinced surprisingly little interest in current affairs. He enjoys music on occasion and once even (flagpole, fetish) defers to Freud. At one point he contemplates a lecture on women writers. It was in part thanks to Irène Némirovsky, then a well-established novelist, that Grasset published *Laughter in the Dark*. The *New Yorker* rejected his poem on Superman and Lois Lane’s honeymoon night.

Superimposing his magic carpet patterns upon each other from a young age, he is a man exquisitely attuned to anniversaries. He will ultimately develop an elegiac streak but more often tended to project his nostalgia into the future: in 1941 he cites a line about his linguistic travails from the “2074, Moscow” edition of “Vladimir Sirin and His Time.” He is delighted in the 1930s to read that he has been ranked among “the small number of world humourists.” Never, he purrs, has a truer thing been written about him. Sometimes the humor was inadvertent. In 1944 he wrote to Véra: “I am sending you, my darling, two bills, which evidently need to be paid.”

Letters to Véra goes silent from 1954 to 1964, the years that make for the longest section of *Selected Letters* and that would return the couple to Europe. In

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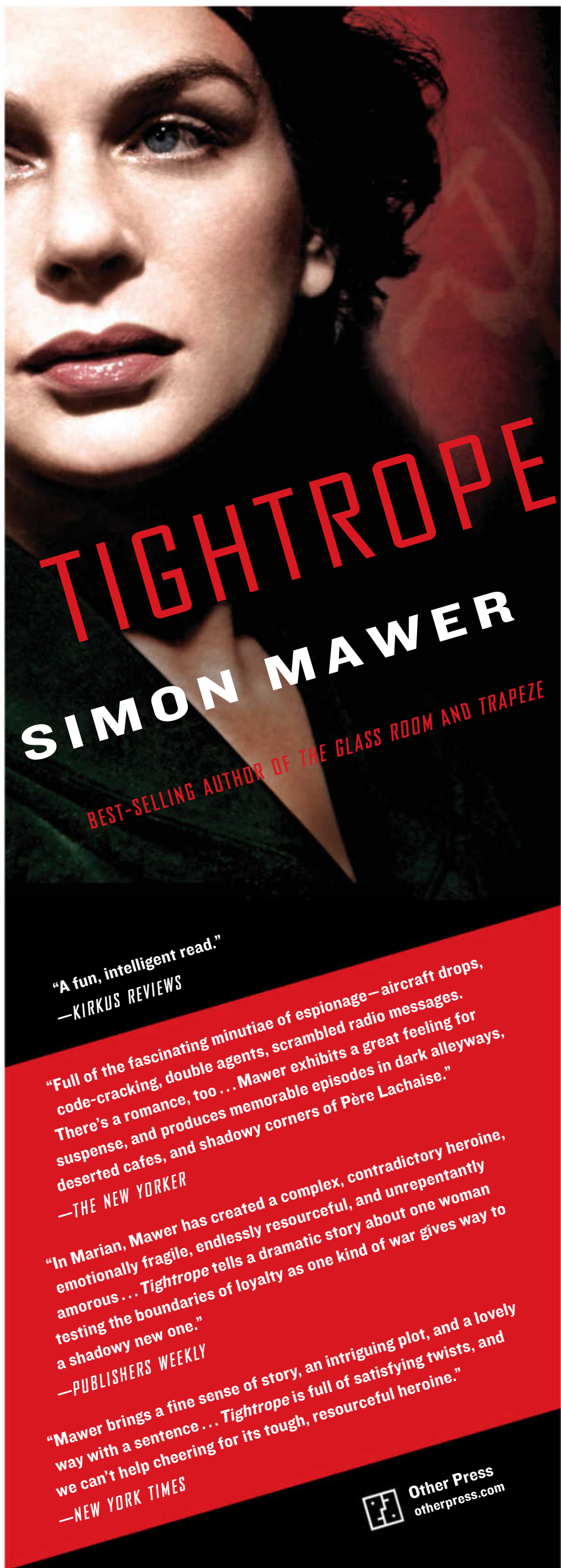


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—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

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—NEW YORK TIMES

 Other Press
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Nabokov in America, Robert Roper revisits the decades that precede that second "voluntary exile." Even the most ardent admirer of *The Gift* has to admit that the central panel of the Nabokovian triptych—the years that yielded what Roper calls "the luminous books of his American prime"—is the dazzler. He follows the couple across America, retracing their butterfly-collecting excursions over several thousand miles. He sets himself a twofold mission: he means to prove Nabokov very much an American. And he hopes to say simpler, less esoteric things about the novelist, to liberate him from the grasp of the academy, a mission that would have amused his subject. Nabokov could not have guessed himself in need of rescue, least of all from a group that had had little use for him—at one point his Wellesley title was the extraterrestrial-sounding "Interdepartmental Visitor"—in the first place.

Roper writes with loping energy and a passionate, longtime love of the literature; his are a fan's notes. He trails the couple across the American West as *Speak, Memory* flops commercially, as Nabokov tends to that other novel, that "great and coily thing," as he described it, the shocking work that Véra's father had unknowingly anticipated decades earlier. Roper juxtaposes the nymphet's childhood with Dmitri's, of which *Lolita*'s is the "dark negation." He veers a bit into the thicket in search of her origins, suggesting a parallel with *Absalom, Absalom!*, another monomaniacal volume, if one he acknowledges that Nabokov nowhere mentions and surely never read. At times Roper whips himself into a froth; his is more a convoluted than a fancy prose style. Here he is on the approach of Hurricane *Lolita*:

The Nabokovs were as solid and well prepared for big change as can be imagined; they were deeply in love, partners in an enterprise—the advancement of the husband's writings—that seems never to have awakened envy in the wife; neither had a drinking problem or at this point was prone to stray; and the husband's oft-expressed belief in his own genius, which once might have hinted at underlying uncertainty, the recognition that the best creators are often plowed under regardless, graced only with the world's forgetting, had, like Vladimir himself, only grown stouter.

How you feel about his work may depend on how interested you are in roadside American architecture of the 1930s or in Dmitri's mountaineering instructors. It may also depend on how much you are willing to believe that Nabokov was steeped in or influenced by American fiction, much of which even Roper concedes Nabokov did not know; he points out that—with the exception of *The Headless Horseman*—Nabokov was on his arrival in 1940 largely ignorant of non-European, non-Russian literature. Astutely, he suggests that on occasion a fat debt lurks in the derision. Indeed Nabokov could seem to protest too much. Might a certain admiration for D.H. Lawrence, Roper wonders, explain the "ostentatious sneer"? He argues convincingly that America emboldened Nabokov and worked as an accelerant on his pyrotechnics, intensifying *Lolita*'s pastel prototype. On his 1939 short story "The Enchanter,"

this country performed the kind of giddy supersizing magic that conjures a Coupe de Ville from a Deux Chevaux.

Roper aims to prove that a "wide-ranging and semi-surreptitious immersion in American cultural materials, his assimilating of our literary traditions" shaped Nabokov's work. The first case comes more easily than the second. Somehow Roper has Nabokov taking his place among Kerouac, Faulkner, Mailer, sharing the page with John Muir, Thoreau, Lewis and Clark. It is not unfair to compare his career with that of Ayn Rand, but I would not want to be around when Nabokov heard *Lolita*'s gestation discussed in even remote proximity to that other newly minted American, Thomas Mann, whose work he reviled.

Indeed he admired Salinger. Indeed the two men's work appeared, at the same time, in the same magazine pages. But are *Lolita* and *The Catcher in the Rye* truly "vaguely aware" of each other? Is Humbert really meant to parody Holden? Roper compares scenes in the two novels—Holden observes Phoebe in her open-mouthed slumber, as Humbert gazes on the sleep-talking Lo—to conclude that Nabokov imbibed Salinger's vapors. "In its essence," argues Roper, *Lolita* evokes *Moby-Dick*, "which Nabokov might never have read to the end." Why? Because the two share "an immense anxiety about the world," and in their ways, because both novels allude to Shakespeare. He goes out on multiple limbs, occasionally sawing them off behind him. Having speculated that Nabokov may have known *The Last of the Mohicans*, he concludes: "Probably Nabokov's path to channelling this mode is best explained, however, not by examining literary influences but by invoking the imponderables of inspiration."

It is a little easier to discern shades of Wordsworth and Whitman in *Pale Fire*. But generally it is dangerous to play the Kevin Bacon game with Nabokov, to separate him even by six degrees from Dickinson, Emerson, Hawthorne. The overly inferential critic risks a Kinbotean crash against the windowpane. Nabokov took from America what he needed—the kitsch, the candor, the materialism—and left the rest. The country's natives never ceased to amaze: they planted Bibles in hotel rooms, shared combs, and taught German literature without mention of Kafka. He was radical on the page as only a man in love with prerevolutionary Russian orthography can be. Yes, he believed himself an American writer. He felt he had done his best work in English; his debt to this country was unspeakably great, his patriotism unshakable. Any insult to the Stars and Stripes left him howling.

Even if he exaggerated in claiming that *Lolita* was without "precedent in literature," that *Pnin* had no fictional antecedents, that *Pale Fire* resembled nothing that had been written before, that no author had ever attempted what he had done with "The Vane Sisters," the aristo-aesthete with magnificent disdain for convention had a point. He had slipped his bonds so many times he could no longer be pinned down. He remains beyond classification, though he may share a genus with another exile who reinvented a nonnative language while rewriting the map. "*Vous êtes Anglais?*" a French journalist asked Samuel Beckett. "*Au contraire,*" replied the Irishman. That Wellesley title said it all. Interdepartmental visitor indeed. □

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Behind 'King Lear': The History Revealed

Fintan O'Toole

The Year of Lear:
Shakespeare in 1606
 by James Shapiro.
 Simon and Schuster,
 367 pp., \$30.00

Even by its own standards of extremity, *King Lear* ends on a note of extraordinary bleakness. The audience has just been through the most devastating scene in all of theater: Lear's entrance with his dead daughter Cordelia in his arms and the words "Howl, howl, howl, howl!" coming from somewhere deep inside him. All is, as Kent puts it, "cheerless, dark, and deadly."

Albany, the weak, widowed, and childless man who is all that remains of political authority, goes through the ritual end-of-play motions of rewarding the good and punishing the bad, but these motions are self-consciously perfunctory. When he says, "What comfort to this great decay may come/Shall be applied," we know that the comfort will be small and cold. Albany promises to restore Lear to his abandoned kingship, but the old king utterly ignores the offer of power, and promptly dies.

Albany then tries to appoint Edgar and Kent as joint rulers, but Kent replies that he, too, intends to die shortly. No one, it seems, is willing to perform the necessary theatrical rites of closure, to present even the pretense that order has been restored. And so the only possible ending is the big one. Because the play cannot end, the world must end. In the original version that Shakespeare completed in 1606, the last lines are Albany's:

*The oldest have borne most. We
 that are young
 Shall never see so much, nor live
 so long.*

Why will the young not live to be old? Because the end of the world is coming. The bad news does not end there. This is not even the Christian apocalypse, in which the bad are damned to Hell and the good ascend into the eternal bliss of Heaven. We've just seen a version of that last judgment, with the rather pitiful Albany playing God the Father:

*All friends shall taste
 The wages of their virtue, and all
 foes
 The cup of their deservings....*

This assurance of just desserts is immediately undercut by one of the most terrifying images of injustice, Lear's raging at a universe in which dogs, horses, and even rats have life but his daughter will never have any again, in this world or the next: "Never, never, never." This is why *King Lear* was so unbearable that it was Nahum Tate's infamous version, with its happy end-



King James I of England, in a portrait attributed to John de Critz, circa 1606;
 William Shakespeare, in a portrait attributed to John Taylor, circa 1610



Dulwich Picture Gallery, London/Bridgeman Images (left)

ing for Lear, Cordelia, and Edgar, that held the stage from 1681 to 1843, and why a critic as discerning as Samuel Johnson supported Tate's alterations on the grounds that Shakespeare's ending violates the natural human desire for justice. Johnson admitted to finding the original ending so upsetting that he did not reread it until his duties as an editor of Shakespeare forced him to do so.

This aversion is not unreasonable. *King Lear* is not apocalyptic, it is far worse. Instead of deserved damnation and merited salvation, there is merely the big fat O, the nothing that haunts the play, the "O, O, O, O!" with which Lear expires. Even Shakespeare seems to have thought twice about this utter annihilation of hope and justice. When he rewrote the play, probably two or three years after its first performance in 1606, he allowed Lear (and the audience) one little moment of merciful illusion. Instead of that terrible "O, O, O, O!" Lear is permitted to lapse with his dying breath into the fantasy that Cordelia's dead lips are moving after all. It is as if even Shakespeare, watching his own play, could not quite bear its unyielding ferocity.

That such a play is possible at all is one of the great wonders of human creation. That it was written by a liveried servant of a Calvinist king who devoutly believed in salvation and damnation, and performed at his court, seems almost inexplicable. Or at least it seemed inexplicable before James Shapiro's wonderfully illuminating *The Year of Lear*.

Shapiro's *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599*, published in 2005, broke new ground in the subtlety, vividness, and richness of its explorations of the relationship between Shakespeare's plays and their imme-

diated social and political settings.* He repeats that achievement for 1606, an astonishing year in which Shakespeare finished the first version of *King Lear*, probably wrote all of *Macbeth*, and almost certainly wrote and staged *Antony and Cleopatra*. Shapiro plunges these tragedies back into the whirlpool of plots and plagues, of religious and political anxieties, from which they emerged. He does not drown them in historical detail, but he does bring them before us still wet from their struggle to emerge from the urgent currents of politics and power.

Shapiro has a marvelous ability to use his formidable scholarship, not to pluck out the heart of Shakespeare's mysteries, but to put the beating heart of the contemporary back into them. His great gift is to make the plays seem at once more comprehensible and more staggering. The better we understand the immediate materials with which Shakespeare was working and the political pressures to which he was responding, the more profoundly we can appreciate the alchemy of his transformations.

To see Shakespeare as a court official working to please his political masters is not to reduce him to the level of functionary or propagandist. It is to marvel anew at the ways in which he could use even such humbling demands as sources of imaginative energy. Though it may be incidental to his purpose, Shapiro effectively overturns the Romantic conception of the artist as the champion of freedom over necessity. We begin to see a Shakespeare for whom the distinction between freedom and necessity is scarcely relevant. Here is Shakespeare as an opportunist

in every sense, a political operator taking advantage of a shift in power and a voracious artist for whom the need to please new masters is not a restriction but a creative stimulus.

In April 1603, James VI of Scotland, then just thirty-six, began his long ride from Edinburgh to London, where he would succeed the childless Elizabeth I as James I of England. This was an unlikely event: Henry VIII had gone to the considerable trouble of breaking with Rome and marrying six wives in order to secure the future of his Tudor dynasty. Yet it was Henry's sister Margaret, who married into the Scottish Stuarts, whose descendants would rule in seventeenth-century Britain. The irony was surely not lost on Shakespeare. *Macbeth* also goes to a lot of a trouble to create a dynasty but it is Banquo's heirs who will reign.

For Shakespeare, James's arrival was double-edged. The new king and his wife were much more interested in the theater than Elizabeth had been and the most immediate beneficiary of James's patronage was Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Almost immediately, James chose Shakespeare and his eight core collaborators to be the King's Men. Their new title was not merely symbolic: as of May 1603 Shakespeare was an official of the court as Groom of the Chamber. He and his fellow shareholders were each issued with four and a half yards of red cloth to make the royal livery in which they were allowed to appear on state occasions.

This royal patronage imposed new demands. Typically, the Lord Chamberlain's Men had performed for Elizabeth two or three times a year. As the King's Men, they performed for James nine times in 1603–1604, ten times the following year, and ten times again in 1605–1606—more court appearances in the first three years of James's reign than in all of Elizabeth's. Shapiro reckons that around twenty of Shakespeare's previously written plays were probably staged for James in these years.

The royal demand for more Shakespeare plays had grown but the supply was running short. By his own prodigious standards, Shakespeare was in a relatively fallow period. In those first three years of the Jacobean era, he wrote just two plays, *Measure for Measure* and *Timon of Athens* (with Thomas Middleton), even though he was no longer appearing as an actor at the Globe and presumably had more time to write. He seems to have been spending more time in his hometown of Stratford-upon-Avon, using his earnings from his theatrical career to build

*See Anne Barton's review in these pages, May 11, 2006.

up his status as a prosperous landowner. Whatever the reason, Richard Burbage, who played all of the main tragic roles in the King's Men, had to admit to the court in January 1605 that they had "no new play that the queen has not seen" and could offer only an old comedy, *Love's Labours Lost*. Their star playwright would have to get his acts together.

If Shakespeare was under pressure to produce new material, he was also under pressure to produce a new kind of material and indeed to imagine a new place. Before James became king, Shakespeare was an English playwright. Now he had to be a British playwright. James's big project was the political unification of the entire island. In his opening address to the London Parliament in 1604, he compared his accession to an indissoluble marriage: "What God hath conjoined then, let no man separate. I am the husband, and all the whole isle is my lawful wife." The silver medal minted to commemorate his accession acclaimed James as the "emperor of the whole island of Britain," and his coronation medal hailed him as "Caesar Augustus of Britain."

But the forging of a new identity for James's "Great Britain" was a formidable ideological challenge. The London Parliament had no enthusiasm for a full union. Scotland and England had long been mutually antagonistic countries. In *Henry IV, Part 1*, Prince Hal jokes that the widely admired English border warlord Hotspur "kills me some six or seven dozen of Scots at a breakfast." Now there could be no more jokes about killing Scots by the dozen. Shakespeare put on the king's livery imaginatively as well as literally. On the fundamental question of what country he was in, he became his master's voice. *King Lear* and *Macbeth* are British, not English, plays. Lear is "King of Britain"; Macbeth is overthrown by a joint Scottish/English army. Shapiro reports that the words "England" or "English" appear 356 times in Shakespeare's pre-Jacobean plays but only thirty-nine times after James took power in London. Conversely, "Britain" appears only twice in the Elizabethan plays but twenty-nine times in those written under James.

The great pleasure of *The Year of Lear* is that Shapiro allows us to feel the movement of Shakespeare's quicksilver mind as he seizes on James's political and religious obsessions and makes them his own. Indeed, what comes across most strongly is Shakespeare's genius for transforming what is, objectively, a servile relationship with his sovereign, master, and employer into a breathtaking act of appropriation. Shakespeare doesn't just write to James's order—he somehow manages to absorb James's interests into his own imagination. In fact—though Shapiro does not go this far—it does not seem unreasonable to think of Shakespeare treating James (who was, after all, attempting to alter the consciousness and identity of his subjects) as a fellow dramatist, and then doing what he always did with fellow dramatists: taking their best ideas and plots and reprocessing them.

Robert Greene's famous complaint about the young Shakespeare—"an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers"—is not entirely unjustified, though of course Shakespeare used the feathers he plucked from others to make

wings that could fly in previously unimagined directions. This is essentially what he does with James. He plucks the king's obsessions and ideological projects and uses them to beautify his own work. It is an astonishingly adept combination of deference and impudence, the King's Man at once serving and stealing from his boss.

Some of what Shakespeare took from James is obvious enough. The idea of Britain in *Lear* and *Macbeth* is a direct response to the king's insistence that England and Scotland are to be treated as a single entity. James's interest in witchcraft is catered to in *Macbeth*. The king's understandable concern with the evils of regicide feed into the



'King Lear Weeping over the Dead Body of Cordelia'; painting by James Barry, 1786–1788

same play, whose first and last acts feature the killing of Scottish kings. But Shapiro uncovers deeper layers of influence. He catches Shakespeare in the act of reading up on subjects known to be of concern to James and, in the process, discovering not just new themes but even new words.

The most striking example is James's deep curiosity about demonic possession. The king personally examined an allegedly possessed young woman, Anne Gunter, and arranged for her veracity to be tested by an acknowledged expert on true and false possession, Samuel Harsnett, who published *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* in 1603. Shakespeare, picking up on the king's curiosity, read Harsnett's book. Over eighty passages in *King Lear* are indebted to the *Declaration*'s descriptions of people acting as if they are possessed—the very guise that Edgar takes on when he becomes Poor Tom, the wandering beggar. No single book is the source of as many unusual words and phrases in Shakespeare as the *Declaration*, from which he culls, for example, "meiny," "propinquity," "auricular," "gaster," "yoke-fellow," and "vaunt-courier." Some of the names of devils that torment Poor Tom are taken directly from Harsnett: Puff, Pure, Frateretto, Flibbertigibbet, Mahu, Smulkin, Obidicut.

What matters, though, is not just Shakespeare's taking up of James's concerns, but the way he makes them his own. The language and gestures of demonic possession allow Shakespeare to use the king's interest as springboards for his own imaginative

leap into the abysses of mental breakdown. The storm scenes of *King Lear* are like nothing Shakespeare or anyone else ever wrote, with the deranged Lear conducting his mock trial of his absent daughters, the Fool throwing in snatches of sense and nonsense, of songs and proverbs, and Edgar's Poor Tom performance reaching into the darkest corners of madness to pluck out a terrible poignancy:

The foul fiend haunts Poor Tom in the voice of a nightingale. Hoppe-dance cries in Tom's belly for two white herring. Croak not, black angel: I have no food for thee.

What begins as an opportunist keeping an eye out for what will appeal to his

ously arcane word to be widely understood and associated with religious treason is evident from the monologue of the Porter in *Macbeth*, imagining who might be hammering on the gate as if it were the gate of Hell:

Faith, here's an equivocator, that could swear in both the scales against either scale, who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven.

Yet just as Poor Tom takes the language of feigned possession and pushes it into a terrifying psychological terrain, *Macbeth* as a whole seizes on James's political interest in equivocation and propels it far beyond the boundaries of its immediate political meaning. In James's world, equivocators are identifiable people. They are Catholics infected with a Jesuitical doctrine. They can be found out and punished by those who are not equivocators—good loyal Protestants. But this is not what happens in *Macbeth*. In the play, equivocation rules. The witches are the greatest of all equivocators—they lie like truth with ingenuity and aplomb. And their deceptions are completely successful: Macbeth does not grasp their treachery until it is far too late.

Even more disturbingly, though, it is not just the evil witches who equivocate. Almost everybody does—the good and the bad. Poor Lady Macduff engages in classic equivocation when her son asks her whether his father is a traitor. The nobleman Ross equivocates when he tells Macduff that his wife and children are "at peace," withholding the news that they are at peace because they have been butchered. In one of the queerest scenes in all of Shakespeare, the "good" Malcolm launches into an elaborate set of lies to Macduff about his own character. He explains this as a test of Macduff's loyalty, but its effect is morally vertiginous. We begin to wonder whether Malcolm, who will replace Macbeth, may not in fact be lying like truth, whether he may not be the monster he has accused himself of being. What happens in the play is not that lies and truth are eventually unraveled, but that they come to feel like the same thing. In a vicious world, the play asks, who can survive without lying, and who can tell deception from honesty?

Because *Macbeth* picks up on so many cues from James—witches, equivocators, Scottish dynastic origins—it is easy to miss what it does not do. In making the untrustworthiness of appearances and of language a universal condition of life under arbitrary power, Shakespeare avoids the immediate political agenda of identifying them with a specifically Catholic amorality. We get some sense of why he might have done this from Shapiro's startling researches into Shakespeare's own connections to the Gunpowder Plot. Shakespeare probably did not know the main plotters (though two of the leaders were nephews of the same Edward Arden to whom Shakespeare claimed a familial connection when he applied for a coat of arms), but he certainly knew many of those caught up in the chaos and repression that followed its discovery.

As it happened, the main center for the wider conspiracy was in Shakespeare's native Warwickshire. The arms depot for the Catholic uprising

that was to follow the murder of the king was just a few miles north of his own town of Stratford-upon-Avon, where Shakespeare’s family and business interests were centered. A strip of land rented by Shakespeare himself abutted Clopton House, which in turn was rented by the conspirators as the nerve center for their rebellion. Shakespeare’s longtime next-door neighbor in Stratford, George Badger, was arrested with a cache of Catholic vestments, crucifixes, chalices, and relics. Other neighbors, including the man who would later sign as a witness to Shakespeare’s will, were brought in as a jury to examine the hoard. Other Catholic townspeople, whom Shakespeare would have known well through business and family connections, were suspected of involvement and marched off to the Tower of London.

We will never know what Shakespeare thought of the Gunpowder Plot, but thanks to Shapiro we can say with some confidence that he knew very well the human cost for Catholic recusants whose lives were destroyed by it. In *Macbeth*, he does not blame Catholics for the moral chaos of equivocation. He blames power itself, and its infinite capacity to corrupt language and corrode

humanity. In Lady Macduff’s equivocal answers about whether her husband is a traitor, we catch the terror of all those under interrogation trying desperately to use words to evade death.

The most remarkable thing is that this deep skepticism about power does not work against Shakespeare’s efforts to please the man in power. It originates with them. Because he so thoroughly appropriates James’s concerns, he can at once inhabit them and transform them. Nowhere does this work so strangely and so disturbingly as in *King Lear*. There is no doubt that the impetus for the play is to support James’s campaign to unify Britain by showing the horrors of a disunited kingdom. Lear’s dismembering of his kingdom is the negative correlative of James’s destiny to make its body whole again. An anonymous play about Lear (or Leir), *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*, first staged around 1590, was printed in 1605 by a publisher who obviously saw the relevance of the story to James’s project of reinventing Britain. Shakespeare clearly admired this opportunism. In the first printed version of his own play, he sometimes absent-

minedly uses “Leir” instead of Lear. Shakespeare, of course, deepened the existing drama immensely, adding the entire subplot of Gloucester and Edgar and the madness that overthrows the old king’s mind. But the most radical shift is at the end. *The True Chronicle History* is a moral tale with a happy outcome: Leir is reunited with Cordelia and restored to his kingdom. This is in keeping with the original story told in Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, but more importantly it allows for an image of restored unity and reinforced authority that suits James’s purposes. Shakespeare doesn’t just change this ending; he assaults it with that extraordinary psychological violence in which the very idea of a satisfactory (let alone a happy) ending is exploded. *King Lear* cannot end because authority cannot be restored. This impossibility results from Shakespeare’s greatest act of opportunism. James’s interests have given him the opportunity to write a play about the collapse of all political order and that in turn gives him the opportunity to show what authority really looks like when it is not propped up by power. In *King Lear*, it is the old king himself, speaking to the viciously blinded Gloucester, who utters

the most savage attack on all authority:

Lear: A man may see how the world goes with no eyes; look with thy ears. See how yon justice rails upon yon simple thief. Hark in thy ear: handy-dandy, which is the thief, which is the justice? Thou has’t seen a farmer’s dog bark at a beggar?

Gloucester: Ay, sir.

Lear: An the creature run from the cur, there thou mightst behold the great image of authority. A dog’s obeyed in office.

There is no going back from this. If the great image of authority is a cur biting the heels of a beggar, what does it matter who is king? Even the blind can see how the world goes: put a dog on the throne and men will bow before it. When Albany offers Lear the restoration of his kingdom, the old man does not even hear him. The divine right of kings, so insistently upheld by James, has become a thing of nothing. The King’s Man in his red royal livery plucked his master’s anxiety about the need for unquestioned authority and used it to summon up the deeper fear that, in their most secret selves, must haunt all kings. □

THIRTY THOUSAND ISLANDS

Somewhere nearby
Mr. Dialect crouches
down a cheekbone of azoic rock,
hornblende granite,
back to the back
of the aluminum boat.

Water sloshing the sides of the boat,
oddly abrasive hollow sound
like buying real estate.

For instance
B578,
a natural harbor to the north
and three inlets to the south like swimming pools,
later named, and this is true,
Schade Island.

Have mercy, Lord, on me, sang her girlfriend
on the rocks as she immersed the notebooks
of STC into print on a screened-in porch.

He’s just offshore, casting
an eye over the untroubled water
on all those improving the common law,
where nothing goes on
occurring to him
with a kind of largesse.

*

Here in the land Romanticism neglected
the Enlightenment passed by and planted
a shrub, a flag to flap and fling
the moon’s weather, should you
wish it confirmed.

*

A neighborhood sketchy with white pine,
red pine, white pine, blueberries
small in size and glaucous.

Wrinkles in the gneiss run parallel
as if an island had its uses
at one time, its maneuvers.

An animal tone
to the granite
as it masses and hides in the water.

And trees that lean from the rock
defy photographers. Stoic raconteurs,
parked here just this aeon,

limbs widely down on
the twist investing
every vertical.

*

Where stacked skyscrapers of frozen water carved the pink-complexioned
rock into this feminine shape, he stands
a diagnosis on his face
a smile inclined
at the fury of masters perceiving the privileges of their kind extinct.

*

Imagine him saying if
his father’s form and meaning
merged
he’d make stones capable.
Was that likewise provocation
on his part, implying
stones were stones, alas,
the ghost
as composition
had its flaws?
You see he likes to cull
and crack assertions
from all over—No woman
no cry, and so on.

—Jana Prikryl

Messianic America: Can He Explain it?

Michael Ignatieff

American Foreign Policy and Its Thinkers

by Perry Anderson.
Verso, 272 pp., \$24.95

Worldmaking: The Art and Science of American Diplomacy

by David Milne.
Farrar, Straus and Giroux,
609 pp., \$35.00

At the age of seventy-seven, Perry Anderson is the most distinguished living member of a generation of British Marxist historians and theorists who dominated intellectual life on the British left from the late 1950s until the 1990s. They included Eric Hobsbawm, E. P. Thompson, Ralph Miliband, Isaac Deutscher, Christopher Hill, Rodney Hilton, Stuart Hall, Raphael Samuel, and Gareth Stedman Jones. If you were a young historian just starting out in the London of the 1970s, as I was, these figures were lodestars. You didn't have to share their politics to be inspired by their work. They championed a social history that sought to rescue the poor and excluded from what Thompson called "the enormous condescension of posterity." They set out to rescue what was living and humane in Marxism from the rigor mortis of Stalinism.

Perry Anderson (Eton, Worcester College, Oxford) was an Olympian figure amid the ferment of the times, a Trotskyist with an aloof and cutting style whose editorship of *New Left Review* turned it into the most intellectually serious venue in Western Marxism. Anderson arrived at Oxford in October 1956, and the twin dramas of that moment—the Suez debacle and the Hungarian uprising—helped make him a lifelong foe of Western imperialism and an equally passionate critic of Stalinist tyranny.

This brought him into conflict with Eric Hobsbawm, who defended Communist ideals, if not the Soviet system, to the end of his life. Anderson also felt called upon to emancipate the British left from its parochial provincialism, welcoming Louis Althusser, Étienne Balibar, and Nicos Poulantzas into the pages of *New Left Review* and Verso books. Anderson's embrace of French theory provoked the most brilliant of the British historians, E. P. Thompson, into a furious polemical exchange in which Thompson defended the native sources of English radicalism and excoriated the desiccated abstraction of Continental theorizing against Anderson's call for a more cosmopolitan and intellectually ambitious Marxism. In the 1970s, these debates within the Marxist canon were gripping and vital. Now, forty years later, they appear as distant as the disputations of medieval scholastics.

Anderson, now a professor at UCLA, cleaves to the ancient faith, and so his new book offers an opportunity to ask what power of illumination Marxism still retains. What was elevating about Marxism? Even those who didn't like Marxism's politics admired its intellectual ambition and its faith that history with a capital H had a discernible logic. Anderson's work has held true to this ideal of rendering the logic of histori-

cal change visible, using a Marxist approach that is idiosyncratically his own. In his most recent book, *American Foreign Policy and Its Thinkers*, he sets himself the task of developing "a connected understanding of the dynamics of American strategy and diplomacy in a single arc from the war on Mexico to the war on Terror."

The book fails to deliver on such ambitions but it remains a fluent, elegant, and occasionally mordant essay marked by biting judgments and icy humor. It is divided into two parts, the first "Im-



Perry Anderson at the Frontiers of Thought conference, Porto Alegre, Brazil, 2013

perium," his own account of the rise of the American imperium and the second "Consilium," a close reading of how American theorists have understood that ascent. In this second part, he gives a fair and careful account of figures he disagrees with, like Francis Fukuyama and Michael Mandelbaum, while seeking to resuscitate the reputations of a host of lesser-known foreign policy thinkers like Robert Art and Richard Rosecrance. Along the way, he generously acknowledges his debt to lines of radical analysis pioneered in the 1950s and 1960s by William Appleman Williams and Gabriel Kolko, but he also gives an ecumenical welcome to more conservative critics of American expansionism like Robert Tucker.

What's odd is how little of the creaking Marxist stage machinery Anderson bothers to roll out in his own analysis. You'd expect a Marxist to tell you that the dynamics behind American expansion lay in capitalism, in the drive for markets and resources of a growing American economy after the Civil War. Anderson's account emphasizes moral and intellectual influences instead: ideologies of manifest destiny that legitimized domestic expansion and then the war to free Cuba and the Philippines from the Spanish Empire.

Anderson doesn't have much interest in the Marxist penchant for linking these worldviews back to the class origins and interests of their exponents. The ideologies he identifies as central float free of any determinate social location or any linkage to the social and economic cleavages of American society. Instead, he identifies pure ideo-

logical strains in American thought, one exceptionalist, the other universalist, and makes these the drivers of debate. The "exceptionalists" argued that America should "preserve its unique virtues only by remaining a society apart from a fallen world," while universalists were committed to a "messianic activism by the United States to redeem that world."

"Exceptionalists," like the historian Charles Beard, believed that America should stay home lest it lose its soul overseas, while "universalists," like Woodrow Wilson, sought to convince Americans that their vital interests

were served by the vision of America as a global redeemer. Anderson makes an interesting connection between the rejection of Wilson's vision and the limited international exposure of the American economy at that time. In 1920, as Wilson struggled and failed to persuade the Senate to ratify the League of Nations, US foreign trade accounted for no more than 10 percent of GNP and the American domestic market was highly protected. "This disjuncture between ideology and reality," Anderson argues, "brought Wilson's millenarian globalism to an abrupt end."

By the end of World War II, however, America's wartime mobilization had vested the federal government, for the first time, with unprecedented global capacities. Millenarian ambition was now matched by equivalent state capacity. Interestingly, Anderson argues that these foreign policy ambitions always went far beyond America's narrowly economic interests. Indeed if pure economics had defined America's national interest, he suggests, American policy might have been more cautious and circumspect.

Harry Truman, for example, thought it was vulgar for an important statement of postwar American foreign policy, issued under his presidency, to put heavy emphasis on the US interest in free trade and foreign markets. It "made the whole thing sound like an investment prospectus," Truman complained, and he ordered these references struck out of the document.

Instead, for Truman and every president since, Anderson argues, the dominant national interest of the US has been messianic: to redeem the world

in America's own image. Realists have always warned against the hubris and overreach in this approach, but they have argued in vain. For Anderson, liberal internationalism remains "the obligatory idiom of American imperial power." Realism is a subordinate discourse, the prudent fallback when liberal internationalism overreaches.

The most interesting implication of Anderson's argument is that the long catalog of US foreign policy disasters—the overthrow of Mohammad Mosaddegh in Iran in 1953, the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961, the twin quagmires of Vietnam and Iraq—were more than just errors of presidential judgment. They were the price America recurrently pays for the hubristic embrace of a messianic foreign policy, one that has never disciplined its priorities according to rationally defined national interests.

One symptom of messianic overreach, Anderson argues, is systematic exaggeration of threats. One might have thought strong countries, especially those with overwhelming military superiority, would not scare easily. Not so the United States. The Truman administration convinced itself that the Soviet nuclear threat was imminent and overwhelming. The creation of the vast "military-industrial complex" soon followed.

Anderson thinks the US elite exaggerated the Soviet menace in order to legitimize its expansionist goals. The architects of the post-1945 military buildup, figures like James Forrestal, Dean Acheson, and Paul Nitze, manipulated their presidents and American public opinion alike, but in doing so, Anderson argues, they severed policy from the discipline of a realistic estimation of the security threat posed by the Soviets.

Anderson wants us to believe that the American foreign policy elite of the 1940s and 1950s had nothing to be alarmed about. He describes Stalin's foreign policy as "essentially defensive." This is a curious characterization. It was understandable for those in Washington to sound an alarm. They had counted the millions of Russians under arms, watched the reoccupation of the Baltic States, the crushing of Polish, Czech, and Hungarian freedom—along with the continued surveillance and punishment of dissenters—as well as the growth of Communist influence in Italy and Greece, the collapse of the Chinese Nationalists in 1949, and the Chinese and North Korean invasion of South Korea in 1950.

Anderson's characterization of Stalin's foreign policy as defensive may be downright strange, especially if one looks closely at the experience of such critics as Andrei Sakharov, Adam Michnik, and Václav Havel (all unmentioned here); but he is right to emphasize that American foreign policy elites overestimated their own weakness and overestimated the strength of the Communist system. Faced with an adversary with global ambitions, American policymakers responded not with a soberly realistic evaluation of the real threat Stalin posed, but with equally

Luiz Munhoz/Divulgação

millenarian—and perhaps equally unrealistic—national ambitions:

The US state would henceforward act, not primarily as a projection of the concerns of US capital, but as a guardian of the general interests of all capitals, sacrificing—where necessary and for as long as needed—national gain for international advantage, in the confidence of ultimate pay-off.

Once America chose to create an order that defended global capitalism and not just the American variety, Anderson points out, an ever-sharper conflict arose between American national economic interests and the global order it was trying to bring into being. What Anderson calls the US imperium served American economic interests as long as American economic predominance went unchallenged, but by the 1970s the countries it had helped back onto its feet, Germany and Japan, had turned into damaging economic competitors. When Nixon took the US off the gold standard in 1971 and devalued the dollar, he did so to remind these competitors that the imperium was designed to put American economic interests first, but this did not arrest the rise of America's emerging rivals. By the early twenty-first century, the "liberal international order" of open markets and free trade had fostered the rise of China, the Asian Tigers, and the BRICS. *Pax Americana* empowered the regimes that now challenged US hegemony, both economically and politically. As Anderson writes:

American primacy is no longer the automatic capstone of the civilization of capital. A liberal international order with America at its head risks becoming something else, less congenial to the Land of the Free.

As America struggles to remain primus inter pares in a world of competitors that it has empowered, the task of US leadership, in the words of President Obama's deputy national security adviser, Benjamin Rhodes, is "to get America another fifty years as leader." Anderson has little doubt that America will get those fifty years. He waves away those progressives who keep predicting the imperium's demise. No such deliverance is at hand, he maintains. One reason, though he doesn't say so, why American global authority has such staying power is that it is not, as Anderson claims, an imperium, but instead an alliance system based on varying degrees of consent.

You would have expected that a Marxist critic of American hegemony would be interested in explaining why the American left consistently underestimates the staying power of the imperium. Anderson mentions the persistent domestic opposition to American expansion overseas:

At each stage, eloquent American voices had denounced the megalomania of Manifest Destiny, the plunder of Mexico, the seizure of Hawaii, the slaughter in the Philippines, attacking every kind of rac-

ism and imperialism as a betrayal of the anti-colonial birthright of the republic.

But he has no answer to the question of why the opposition to American expansionism loses so often. He makes explanation harder by arguing that domestic political pressure has been essentially irrelevant to the shaping of US foreign policy. He tells us that American public opinion has always been provincial, with "minimal knowledge of the outside world."

This is an odd kind of condescension for a progressive to display, and it leaves him unable to explain how these ignorant provincials took to the streets, felled a sitting president, and forced his successor to exit Vietnam. American popular suspicion of foreign adventures has been a more effective restraint on US foreign policy than Anderson acknowledges. Leaders ignore the foreign policy views of their domestic electorate at their peril. The public now opposes further military misadventures in the Middle East and this domestic reluctance effectively narrows President Obama's policy options in the region. It's strange for a Marxist to be so dismissive of the power of pressure from below.

If one problem with Anderson's analysis is that it neglects pressure from below, the other is that he can't explain why the elites decided as they did. Any broad claim that American foreign policy basically serves the interests of global capital ends up explaining almost nothing about the specific policy choices that American presidents have had to make since 1945. The choices were real, and Anderson doesn't illuminate any of them.

The most basic of these has been to determine what instruments a liberal internationalist foreign policy precisely requires in any given situation. What, for example, did the policy of containment call for concerning the size of US military deployment? Paul Nitze won this argument and an arms buildup followed, but George Kennan, the author of the doctrine, and Walter Lippmann, the most influential columnist of the time, thought Nitze was a dangerous warmonger. Should Truman have allowed General MacArthur to take the Korean War across the Chinese border or was he right to fire him?

These choices appear to be a matter of detail for Anderson, but they are anything but details. Any serious analysis of foreign policy has to tell us why one judgment was made and not another. Should Lyndon Johnson have sharply increased the American presence in Vietnam in 1968 or have begun to pull out? In the ferocious internal debates in 1967–1968, the pillars of the Truman foreign policy establishment—Kennan, Acheson, Clifford—told Johnson to exit the quagmire. These issues divided the country and they divided the elites.

The simple fact that most members of the American foreign policy elite believe the country is a force for good in the world, believe in free trade and open markets, and want to use American power to further the maintenance of a rule-based international order favorable to US interests, doesn't tell

you much at all about what mixture of diplomacy, bilateral or multilateral pressure, or military might they chose to meet these objectives in the event. Why, for example, did Kissinger choose détente over confrontation with Russia in the 1970s? Why did he and Nixon seize the opening to China? Or today, why has the foreign policy consensus that used to prevail between Republicans and Democrats collapsed so spectacularly? The shape that American foreign policy has taken since World War II is the unplanned and unforeseen result of a myriad of contingent strategic decisions like these, not the ineluctable working out of the logic of capitalism.

To understand why American elites decided as they did, *Worldmaking*, David Milne's study of the foreign policy thinkers of America's twentieth century, makes for much more insightful reading. While it is overlong, it pays close attention to personality, argument, contingency, and elite politics, factors Anderson leaves out. All in all, since Anderson's sweepingly general analysis can't explain why actual policy choices were made, it leaves one wondering whether Marxist analysis has much to add to our understanding of American foreign policy.

This is a shame, because even a dyed-in-the-wool liberal like myself has to confess to nostalgia for the days when Marxist critiques forced those of us who have defended American liberal internationalism to face up to its dark side. It is not an exercise of bad faith for a liberal to regret the weakening of a redoubtable opponent. Marxism was also an honorable bearer of Enlightenment humanism and rationalism. Anderson himself, in an elegiac essay in the *London Review of Books*, captures this humanist yearning when he writes:

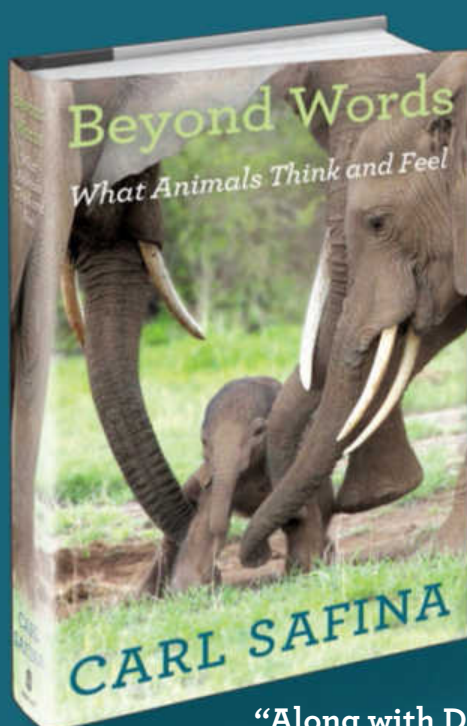
Human beings cannot cease to strive for a social order in which they are no longer subject to the inhuman necessities of a society investing them as if it were a second nature, nor seek to relate that effort to an understanding of the logic of world history.*

Liberalism risks becoming nothing more than resigned managerial quietism unless those seeking a more liberating politics constantly challenge it to deliver more. Whatever our politics, we all stand in need of a historical vision that believes there is a deep logic to the unfolding of time. The problem for Marxists like Anderson is that they will be relegated to irrelevance if they are simply the bearers of an Enlightenment humanism and a historical vision that can't in fact explain the world we're living in. Anderson would accept that it is not possible to change the world if you cannot explain it. On the evidence in this book, he is still far from providing the explanations that are badly needed. □

*"One Exceptional Person Stood Out," *London Review of Books*, July 30, 2015.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

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Even Worse Than We Thought

Julian Barnes

The Crime and the Silence: Confronting the Massacre of Jews in Wartime Jedwabne

by Anna Bikont, translated from
the Polish by Alissa Valles.
Farrar, Straus and Giroux,
544 pp., \$30.00

Thomas Mann believed that all good stories are slow stories. He was doubtless thinking of Wagner, his greatest literary influence—but also, naturally, of Thomas Mann. And in the best hands, slowness can feel the exact speed necessary for truthfulness. In less sure hands, it can produce a kind of maximalist minimalism: see Karl Ove Knausgaard. But Mann's dictum also applies to other narrative forms, like the documentary film.

One of the greatest documentaries of the last fifty years is Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*. This most terrifying of films doesn't open with haunting images or pumped-up voice-over claims. It opens with the sound of a man singing first a Polish folk song, and then a German marching song, as a boat is paddled slowly along the river Narew, past calm green meadows. He is, it turns out, a forty-seven-year-old survivor of the camp at Chelmno who, as a thirteen-year-old captive and mascot of the Germans, used to sing the same songs as he rowed the same stretch of river to fetch alfalfa for his captors' pet rabbits. The pace of the film is to be the pace of that boat. The destination, upstream, through waters filled with obstructions and muck and lies, is the truth at the source of that river.

The slowness of *Shoah* is deliberately inbuilt. The camera is often held for a long time on the seemingly expressionless faces of witnesses to dreadful distant happenings; we think and try to imagine, as they think and cannot help remembering. Then there is the matter of translation. Lanzmann asks a question in French, the translator turns it into Polish, perhaps, or Hebrew. We hear the reply in that language, then the translation back into French. And along the way we Anglophones read the subtitles. It could be cumbersome, but in fact is the opposite. We wait, just as Lanzmann waits, for the answer, be it some horrifyingly ordinary detail, a brazen evasion, or a stiff-jawed denial. And in this waiting we assess the reliability of the witness, just as he is doing.

We watch, for instance, as a succession of aging Poles cheerfully demonstrate the throat-slitting gesture they made to Jews arriving at railheads close to the killing camps. Lanzmann's technique, both in the investigation itself and in the subsequent editing, is rather like an archaeologist's: a gentle brushing away of the soil so that the artifact will be revealed exactly where and how it was first buried. The method mimics the purpose: that of absolute truth-finding.

There is much slowness in *The Crime and the Silence*, Anna Bikont's magisterial investigation into a small massacre of Jews in the town of Jedwabne in northeastern Poland in July 1941. Part of this is authorial: the necessarily slow

steps toward as much irrefutable truth as can be possibly found this far after the event. Part of it is lectoral: her text is dense with names—some of them confusingly similar, yet whose owners had diametrically opposed destinies—with places and details to remember, and several overlapping timescales. But there is also a slowness imposed on the reader by the dreadfulness of the subject matter. In January 2004, Bikont showed her typescript to Jacek Kuroń, the “theorist of Solidarity,” then in the



The synagogue in Jedwabne, Poland, before World War II

last months of his life. His response was apparently discouraging:

“I don't know how many people will read this,” he worries. “Theoretically I was prepared for the whole thing, you'd already told me so much about it, but even so I had to stop reading every several dozen pages, so hard did I find it.”

Even those who come at the book from a historical and geographical distance will be obliged to pace themselves. It is not just a question of taking in individual spasms of bestial cruelty. It is also a broader question: the rate at which we can stomach the truths of man's inhumanity to man, and ruminate on their causes.

There is, first, the question of numbers. It is impossible for us to imagine, except in a very general way, the death of six million people. Reading about the Holocaust, and seeing film of those killing factories, fill us with terror and pity in a way that often fogs the mind. So what might be the “perfect” number of dead, one that allows us to feel the magnitude of mass death, but also to individualize it? In modern times, it would perhaps be the death toll of a major airplane crash: an end comparatively easy to imagine, and also individualized for us when those mug shots and brief bio-obits appear in the following days' newspapers.

At Jedwabne, the death toll is impossible to estimate accurately. It could be as high as 1,500; or it could, as the prosecutor appointed by the Institute of National Remembrance in 2000 conservatively concluded, be “not fewer than 340.” Taking the (extremely cautious) lower figure, the massacre

at Jedwabne would be comparable to the crash of a jumbo jet. Except that the parallel is only partial. Even if we imagine the captain deliberately crashing the plane, so that it is murder, not an accident, there is this difference. Imagine that airplane crash, but with a fair number of passengers escaping death. As they wander traumatized from the wreckage, staff from the airline beat them to death with clubs and poles and crowbars, chase them into marshes where they drown, and throw

them down wells. That's more what it would be like.

Jews had lived in the town of Jedwabne since 1660. At the end of the nineteenth century, they made up 80 percent of the town's population. By the start of World War II, the balance of ethnic Poles and Jews was reckoned to be equal. Between 1939 and 1944 the town was occupied successively by the Germans, the Soviets (who, after a forced referendum, annexed it as part of western Belarus), the Germans again, and finally the Soviets again. Each invader carried out its purges; each counter-invader, counter-purges. Any underlying tensions between the civilian populations were grossly exacerbated by these changes of hand. Those who collaborated under one regime were punished by the next, those who fought against it rewarded.

But it was more complicated than this: sometimes, my enemy's enemy cannot be relied upon to be my friend. So though many Jews might have been relieved by the first arrival of the Soviets in 1939, which freed them from anti-Semitic Nazis who had invaded earlier in the year, the new arrivals brought their own (Russian and atheistic) anti-Semitism: Hebrew schools were closed, Yom Kippur turned into an ordinary workday, shops and businesses (which had been largely in Jewish hands) Sovietized.

Nor—given the paranoia of Stalinism—was it in any way safe to be idealistically on the side of the new Soviet authorities. To be a Polish Communist was a dangerous thing; to be a Polish-Jewish Communist, doubly so. Stalin had dissolved the Polish Communist

Party in 1937, denounced its adherents as saboteurs, and summoned many of them to Russia, where they were shot.

When the Germans returned to Jedwabne in July 1941, they would have had fresh in their minds the directive issued days earlier, on June 29, by Reinhard Heydrich, then chief of the Reich Main Security Office:

No obstacles should be placed in the way of aspirations toward self-cleansing in anti-Communist or anti-Jewish circles in the newly occupied territories. Rather, such aspirations should be provoked without leaving traces, and if need be they should be intensified and led onto the right track.... The aim is to produce popular local pogroms.

The first pogrom in the area took place at Wąsosz on July 5, the second (“exceptionally well documented,” according to Bikont) at Radziłów, eleven miles from Jedwabne, on July 7, and the biggest one at Jedwabne itself on July 10. There was no shortage of local “aspirants to self-cleansing.” The Jews were wrenched from their houses and beaten, driven to the marketplace and ordered to weed it with spoons, forced to break up a statue of Lenin and run around the marketplace carrying its pieces while singing “the war's our fault.”

Several dozen were herded into a barn, shot, and thrown into a pit; then most of the remaining Jews were driven into the barn, which was doused in gasoline and set alight. Those who escaped or had hidden were tracked down and butchered. The Jewish community in Jedwabne ceased to exist on that day. Their homes and shops were first looted, then occupied by ethnic Poles.

Who did it? The Germans, of course. Just as the Germans had carried out the massacre at Katyn. There was a trial under the Communists in 1949, which convicted twelve ethnic Poles for collaborating with the Germans; an offshoot trial in 1953; and a long-drawn-out investigation lasting from 1967 until 1974, in which time the prosecutor managed to interview a mere sixteen witnesses, and concluded firmly that the Germans were entirely to blame. (This coincided with the Polish government's anti-Semitic campaign of 1968.) So the cover story became established history for more than half a century, commemorated as such on the town square, and published as such on the local school's website.

What changed everything was the publication in May 2000 of Jan Tomasz Gross's *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*, which, apart from court records, drew heavily on the testimony of Szmul Wasersztejn, a survivor of the massacre; also on the *Jedwabne Book of Memory*, compiled in the US from the memories of Jewish emigrants from the town. Gross's conclusions—that it was a “collective murder,” that the Germans were minimally involved,

and that the death toll in the barn ran to 1,600—set off a storm of denial, counter-charge, and furious indifference. The official reaction was to set up an investigation by prosecutor Radosław Ignatiew for the Institute of National Remembrance.

Bikont's book, which began as a journalistic investigation for the *Gazeta Wyborcza*, is meticulous in its procedures, absolute in its commitment to truth, and—perhaps therefore—powerfully dispiriting. Her book widens out historically to record the disgusting pre-war anti-Semitism in Poland—led by the Catholic Church and the professional elites—and the even more disgusting postwar anti-Semitism (98 percent of the country's Jews had been killed, but there were still Polish fascists and “patriots” eager to pull returning Jews off the trains and slaughter them).

Yet the essentially narrow focus on this place, in these years, on the massacre by neighbors, means that the mechanisms and lineaments of anti-Semitism are shown the more clearly and bleakly. As elsewhere, the Jews were placed in all sorts of inescapable double binds. If they were forcibly kept apart from society, it meant that they were by nature separate and alien; if they assimilated, it was because they wanted to undermine Poland from within. They were forbidden from buying land in pre-war Poland, then told that—despite centuries of presence—they were “guests” with “no tie to the land.”

Equally, their virtues were turned against them. If old men, women, and children did not fight back against men with guns and clubs, it meant that they deserved their fate. If they tried hard to help one another, and were rarely found in a ditch cuddling a bottle of vodka, it meant that they were ruled by gold and stealing the shirt from the honest Pole's back. And if, now, as a new century turned, they wanted to uncover exactly what happened in July 1941, it must be less about truth than reparations: further proof of their “historic” greed for gold.

All of a sudden, a payback figure of \$65 billion was in the air (where did it come from? Bikont does not say) and the Jews were out to ruin Poland all over again. And so there was born the new myth of “how vengeful the Yids are.” In 2001, when Bikont started investigating, copies of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* were still being distributed outside the church at Jedwabne; a Polish bishop was talking insolently of the “Shoah business”; the president of the American Polish Congress was explaining how “the Jews decided that Poland should not be Poland but a suburb of Israel”; a Father Bartnik announced that the Jews were “still causing wounds to fester”; while Lech Wałęsa made a blithely self-disgracing comment. Even if all the Jews still remaining in Poland had left, they would probably have found themselves caught in the final half of a final double bind. As the Poznań weekly unironically entitled *Culture* put it in 1936, “The Jewish problem can exist even when there is no longer any Jew left.”

One of the broad conclusions of prosecutor Ignatiew's investigation, which ran parallel with Bikont's own, came as a shock to her: namely, “how universal the tendency to lie is in this case.” The number of Poles who swore they

saw Germans organize and carry out the massacre, with specific memories of personnel, uniforms, and military equipment, amounts to a kind of mass hallucination; or it would, except that the inventiveness of memory makes the various accounts mutually contradictory. (In *Shoah* there is a scene in which a group of Polish peasants confidently assert that they had seen Pullman cars full of rich French Jews, all dressed in finery, dining away in style and heedlessly playing cards as they arrived at the railhead.)

The brazen assertions that not a single ethnic Pole was involved in the Jedwabne massacre likewise came in various and conflicting forms. There was much perjury, some of an especially painful kind: when the trial of 1949 took place, a woman who had



A monument to the Jews killed in 1941 in Jedwabne, Poland, which was erected in 2001 and vandalized with swastikas ten years later, September 2011

saved herself by converting to Catholicism gave evidence in defense of the town's best-known killers, in tacit exchange for the right to continue living there. Krzysztof Godlewski, mayor of Jedwabne when Bikont begins her investigation, an honorable man constantly trying to reconcile irreconcilable factions, tells her, “It's natural to choose the easier truth.” He thinks—he hopes—that “the more difficult truth is gradually sinking in.”

But the easier truth, as Bikont discovers, is extremely tenacious, especially when built out of the lies you have told yourself over decades—lies that, for example, justify the fact that you live in a house that had once belonged to a family of Jews murdered by your neighbors. In *Shoah*, Lanzmann deliberately plays the part of the puzzled, unthreatening interviewer, one who smokes and nods along and occasionally smiles, and who doesn't really understand what happened all those years ago. Sometimes, however, his tone becomes more sardonic—though never unhelpfully provocative—as when talking on the doorsteps of what used to be a Jewish house in Grabow:

Barbara [his translator], tell this couple they live in a lovely house.... Tell me about the decoration of this house, the doors, what does it mean?... Did Jews own this house?... How long have these two lived here?... Where did they live before?... They've gotten rich....

In March 2001, a well-dressed businessman in his thirties, who speaks to Bikont across a fence at 7 Przytułska Street, explains to her the nub of the

problem, as he sees it: “Jews have positions in government and the Church,” he begins. (“The Church”?)

Why are you digging it all up? Because it's a gold mine.... The Jews behave as if this were their home, but when I'm in a foreign country I can't do whatever I like. It was wrong of the Jedwabne authorities to let journalists in to dig up Jewish truth. It's not our truth.

Where might he have got this notion from? Perhaps from someone like Waldemar Chrostowski, priest and professor, vice-president of the Catholic University in Warsaw. Here he is, in January 2003, on the question of numbers: “Why is there talk of the number sixteen hundred, despite the exuma-

no longer the mocked, but had learned to mock back. Specifically, with this chant: “You wanted Poland without Jews, now you have Jews without Poland.” Such heartening impudence was remembered, of course, when the Germans returned.

Another reader to whom Bikont showed her manuscript had this response: “For me the hardest thing to bear is not that the Jews were massacred in Jedwabne and the area, but that it was done with such cruelty and that the killing gave so much joy.” This is indeed the hardest part to stomach, the part that quietly urges you to give up on humanity, yielding to a dismay that this is probably what we are all like, or all capable of being like, at some level, underneath. The joy, the mockery, the exultation of slaughter, and then the shamelessness of the killer's wife turning up at church on Sunday in a looted fur coat only recently worn to synagogue.

It is this relish for killing and the flaunting of spoils that asks us the hardest question. We can identify proximate causes of what happened: the extreme anti-Semitism of public life, the moral *trahison* of the professional classes, the particular circumstances by which Jedwabne and nearby towns changed hands in wartime, the age-long resentment of those who are different, and so on. These are the small “whys,” which lead us to an overwhelming “why”—one at which language as well as thought often fails. Given that most of those involved, on both sides, had and have religious belief, or at least religious observance, the question looms the greater. “I just don't know where God was at that moment,” commented a Catholic Pole who saved and subsequently married a Jewish woman.

Another witness, after running through the accumulated prompts (including his sarcastic admission that things had already “turned out well in Radziłów, they're rid of the problem”), concluded: “And finally, fourth, Satan got into the town.” A similar explanation is given to account for the bad faith, lies, and anti-Semitism of a hitherto admired Polish historian, Tomasz Strzembosz. A fellow historian and friend explained that “the Jedwabne affair awoke a demon in this traditional Polish patriot.”

God taking leave of absence for a day? Satan slipping into town? Demons awakening? For those with a nonreligious, and more mechanistic view of the world, explanation might be slightly easier, though no less bleak. It will tend to be located in a lack—a loss—of the imagination, a kind of mass autism, and a habituation to the banality of evil. A Pole whose mother had hidden two Jewish children on the day of the massacre remembered that as a boy he had taken sand from Jewish graves and stones from the burned barn for the foundation of his family's house:

Everyone took them. Once I found a bone and threw it out in a rage, and a friend of mine threw a skull into the river. It's so shameful when I think about it now, but then we didn't have the imagination to realize.

But it goes beyond historic prejudice, moral indifference, plus a coveting of

your neighbor's goods. One of the killers is quoted drunkenly boasting that "a man to me is nothing more than a whistling of the air." And we are back to the "joy" in and within the slaughter. As the last surviving leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising put it, "There's something in man that makes him like killing."

Bikont does not get drawn into questions about the nature of evil; instead—and rightly—she is too busy delineating and documenting its manifestations. Her eye and ear miss little. Those spoons used for weeding the Jedwabne marketplace turn up decades later during the excavation of the barn: though when found, they are "bent" from the work they once did. Like Lanzmann, she is, almost without exception, tirelessly polite. Here she records the swerving mind and words of a seventy-three-year-old retired seamstress, her mind perverted—or, more likely, endorsed—by the ultra-right-wing Catholic Radio Maryja:

Holy Scripture tells us the Jews are a tribe of vipers, perverts, they're untrustworthy and faithless. They played tricks on the Lord himself, and He had to send down plagues on them. He made them wander in the wilderness for thirty years. It's no accident He punished them in the way He did. I've known about that from before the war, from religious studies. I remember everything. I'm seventy-three and I've still no sclerosis at all, though I don't eat margarine, only butter, because it's Jewish companies that make margarine.

That last sentence is both entirely incidental, and entirely crucial. When the same woman is presented with the fact that Jesus was a Jew, she replies, "What are you saying, he was God's son, that tribe has nothing to do with him. He didn't speak much Hebrew and no Yiddish at all."

Or take this incident from the aftermath of the pogrom in Radziłów. A Jewish woman, Chaja Finkelsztejn, who has escaped the first wave of killing, boldly visits those responsible in an attempt to negotiate a deal for the safety of her family, savagely attacked the previous night. She is referred upward, finally to the pre-war head of the village. She herself is covered not just with bruises but open wounds. It is a matter, simply, of whether the family will live or die:

He covered over his scowl at seeing me with a polite smile. He was pacing the room. Every time he passed the sideboard he'd cut a little slice of bread, put slabs of pork fat on it, and calmly eat it. He listened to my story without a shadow of compassion. He must have known about the attack, maybe he'd even given the order.

It is like some black, inverted version of Gurov's melon-eating in Chekhov's "The Lady with the Little Dog." You would be inclined to call such detail in Bikont's book "novelistic" if that did not imply that it sounds invented. But it is precisely such details that the novelist creates to confirm that what is being told is true.

If this were a moral tale, or a commercial film (like the one proposed by veteran cinéaste Jerzy Skolimowski—about the lifelong love between a Jewish woman rescued by a heroic Pole—until Bikont scotched it by explaining that "Jedwabne doesn't provide the ideal material for a pro-Polish film"), the truth would have a purgative effect; the town would "confront its past," acknowledge what happened, and even, perhaps, "move on." There has certainly been much public discussion, and many truths have come out. Bikont claims—in a postscript to the Polish, though not the English, version of her book—that "few countries can match us in our reckoning with the ghosts of the past."

Maybe; but many of the voices in her own book argue against her. She reports the findings of a Polish sociologist that "after the Jedwabne affair flared up, the number of anti-Semites in Poland increased significantly. Why? Jedwabne sharpened our sense of competitive suffering." Holocaust-denial remains: in 2002 a survey showed that only 14 percent of Poles believed that in Auschwitz they mainly killed Jews (90 percent of those killed there were Jews). Bikont herself—who as an adult discovered by chance that her mother was Jewish—is frequently denounced: as "polonivorous," a "chief Jewish slanderer," and a "journalistic hyena." At various points the reader fears for her safety as she sets off alone to interview known killers and their families. Izaak Wąsersztajn, son of Szmul, whom Bikont meets in Costa Rica, says to her in 2001: "I have one question for you. How can a Jew live in Poland?" He continues, "When I was in Warsaw, I went to the synagogue to ask Jews the same question and none of them could tell me."

The town of Jedwabne remains, by her own account, negationist. The signpost to the site of martyrdom has been removed; the new monument to the victims has been vandalized with green-painted swastikas and the slogan "They Were Flammable." A counter-monument to ethnic Poles deported during the war now stands in the marketplace that the Jews were forced to weed. Two of the town's truth-tellers and principal witnesses have emigrated to the US. (One of them, Mayor Gódlowski, dismayingly reports that in its anti-Semitism "Jedwabne is nothing compared to Chicago.")

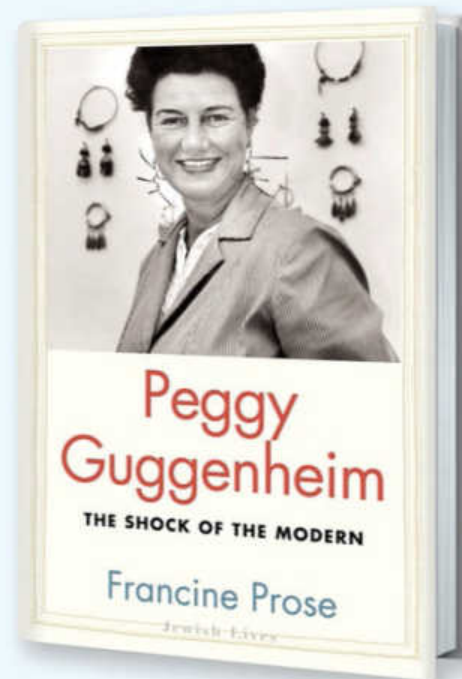
In medieval times, it was a tradition at Jewish prayers to read out long lists of the names of those who had died in pogroms. This led to the creation of "books of memory." Bikont's book is more than a book of memory. It is also a book about forgetting, about the pollution of memory, about the conflict between the easy, convenient truth and the awkward, harder truth. It is a work that grows from its journalistic manner and origins into the powerful writing of necessary history.

When I chaired the jury that gave *The Crime and the Silence* the European Book Prize in 2011, a possible difficulty arose. The book had been published in Polish seven years before the French edition that the jurors read. Might such a delay be a bar to the award? We paused for thought, until a mentally suave (French, of course) journalist came up with the solution. "It was a Polish book in 2004, but a European book in 2011." Now, we must hope, with its emergence into an English text, it will become a world book in 2015. □



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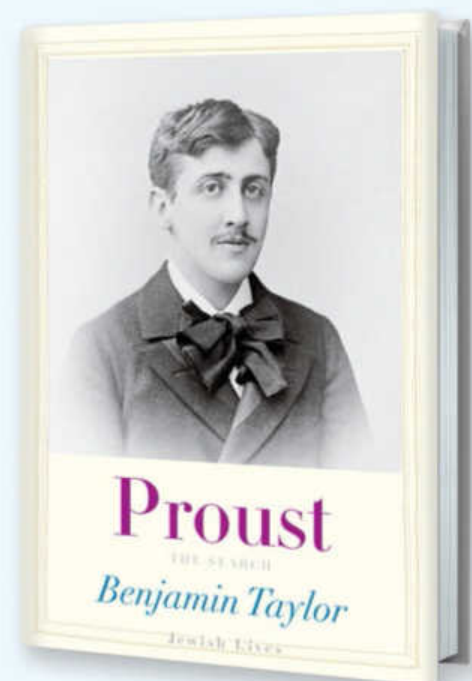
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Empress Theodora, Who Transformed the World

Peter Brown

Theodora:
Actress, Empress, Saint
by David Potter.
Oxford University Press,
277 pp., \$29.95

In the year 500 CE, the Roman Empire was still alive and strong in its eastern territories. It spanned the Balkans, the eastern Mediterranean, and the Middle East. It was almost as large as the Ottoman Empire at the height of its power. At Constantinople (later the Turkish Istanbul), under the rule of the emperor Anastasius, the extremes of north and south, east and west met. Blue-blooded remnants of the Western Roman ancien régime—men and women who had known the great philosopher-senator Boethius—would have stood in the throne room of the imperial palace beside wild Syrian hermits from the eastern frontiers. The war whoops and garbled Latin of the “Gothic dance” performed in the Hippodrome were a reminder of a world whose contacts stretched to the north as far as Finland and Scandinavia. At the same time, the emperor and his advisers peered southward to the equator, as would the Ottoman sultans in the last days of their own empire.

Above all, this empire was in the grip of social, cultural, and religious transformations that had changed the ancient structures of the Roman state from the bottom up. Much as the somewhat prim, post-British India of the 1950s has given way to the India of Bangalore and Bollywood, but also to the sinister massing, along its margins, of fanatical religious parties, so had the venerable institutions associated with the surviving Roman Empire begun to waver and to take on strange new shapes.

This is the age to which David Potter introduces us in his biography of the empress Theodora (who died in 548) and of her equally remarkable consort, the emperor Justinian (who reigned from 527 to 565). He has placed the story of this odd couple firmly against the background of the great, roiling empire in which it took place. In recent decades, historians and archaeologists have collaborated with interpreters of the literature of the Christian East who are no longer content to read only in Greek and Latin, but who have reached out to rich fields in Syriac, Coptic, and Armenian. They have given us a new Byzantium—a wider, more concrete, and altogether more exciting view of the Roman Empire of the East in its last centuries. As the author of *Constantine the Emperor* (2013), a memorable study of power in action, Potter can be trusted to have brought the best out of this new scholarship.

He begins with a daring move. He abandons what used to be our principal source for the life of Theodora—the vicious account of the empress and the emperor in the *Secret History* of Procopius of Caesarea (who wrote in the 550s). He rightly dismisses this as no more than a collection of “nasty stories.”

It is some measure of the triviality that a purely classical tradition of scholarship has imposed on Byzantine studies that it has taken so long to rid

ourselves of Procopius. To classical scholars Procopius seemed safe. He belonged to a known world. He wrote good Greek. He also wrote about naughty things. The story of Theodora as a go-go girl in the circus of Constantinople, or in the palaces of the great, was easy to relate to. It appealed to those who saw the ancient world as the smutty dreamtime of the modern West. It showed that even Constantinople in the sixth century CE could still be a fun place. As a result, studies of the career of Theodora have tended to be tied to the circus and to sex.

Potter explains why Procopius resorted to such invective. He makes clear that “vehemence of expression was... built into the very fabric of government.” For government itself was up for grabs. In this seemingly ancient empire,

there had ceased to be a recognizably traditional governing class.... The question of what gave any person the right to govern... was far more open than it was at any time in the earlier Roman empire.

Hence bitter invective characterized the reaction of the would-be elites to the crowds of newcomers, drawn from all over the empire, who threatened to push them aside. Procopius (the cautious private secretary of a professional general) and others from the more privileged ranks of the bureaucracy lashed out at this new world by circulating grotesquely nasty stories.

Unfortunately for the reputation of the Byzantine Empire, this situation (usually generated by a clash between outsiders and insiders) continued throughout its history. As a result, we almost invariably meet Byzantines first at their most venomous and most trivial, through innumerable “unpublishable” works (all of which, of course, got published and circulated rapidly in opposition circles). One feels that men such as Procopius would have loved Twitter and blogs. But despite the penchant of its elites for the equivalents of Twitter and blogs, Byzantium was a serious empire. Caricatures can only tell us so much. How much would we learn about the deadly serious politics of Britain and the Continent in the age of Napoleon through scanning the caricatures of James Gillray, which present a world of funny Frenchmen and fat dukes and duchesses tumbling in and out of bed?

Potter reminds us of the strains of an empire caught in the midst of drastic changes. Across a countryside that had come to flourish more than at any other time in Roman history—bringing intensive settlement in Syria up to the very edge of the Arabian desert and littering the Middle East and the eastern Mediterranean with sparkling new villas—forces were at work that could no longer be controlled by any central

elite, as local magnates extended a mafia-like grip over the land.

It was the same with the local churches. Their divisions were largely caused by the rigidity with which the “Roman” authorities at the center had enforced observance of the theological definitions laid down at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. But Chalcedon was a rushed job. Not enough time was taken to create an empire-wide consensus on its decrees. Prominent theologians and



Empress Theodora; mosaic from the Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy, sixth century

large areas of the empire felt themselves left out in the cold. They regarded the council as a “transgression”—an unnecessary hiccup in the flow of Christian doctrine.

What was at stake in the argument for or against the Council of Chalcedon was a serious issue. It was nothing less than the degree to which an unimaginably distant God could be thought of having come close to humanity in the unique person of Jesus Christ. The opponents of the Council of Chalcedon, whom we call “Monophysites” (or, more correctly “Miaphysites”), believed that Christ had, indeed, been God in His fullness, walking the earth. He was a unique being—a God-man, undivided by human frailty. They suspected that the upholders of Chalcedon believed that Christ was no more than a frail human being linked, somewhat distantly, to God.

They claimed that only their belief tied God securely to humanity. If He had once come to earth in His fullness, He could be trusted to intervene—again and again, and in full power—to protect the human race among which He had once walked. Otherwise, the

chasm between God and humankind would yawn unbridged. To get one’s science (or theology) wrong on that point, for an Eastern Roman Christian, was quite as serious—and as fraught with the sense of incalculable potential danger for the community as a whole—as it would be for the watchdogs of global warming today to get their science wrong.

Large segments of the population (especially in Syria and Egypt) thought that the emperor and his bishops had gotten their science wrong. By refusing to conform, they called the emperor’s bluff. They gave their own leaders—great bishops and charismatic gurus—the chance to build their own, mafia-like networks in the name of absolute truth.

Altogether, this turbulent social universe contained swirling clouds of what might best be called “dark matter.” There were now ways of reaching the top that had not existed before. There were allies, pressure groups, and authority figures whose existence had escaped traditional Roman eyes, but were well known to the Coptic and Syriac speakers of Egypt and the Middle East.

It is in this world of dark matter that Potter introduces us to Theodora and to the young prince Justinian. They first met in 520 CE, not in Constantinople, but in the city of Antioch—Constantinople’s ear to the east. It was there that Theodora revealed to a confidante that she had dreamed that she was sleeping with the king of the demons. In modern terms, she had begun to date the prince. What had brought them together in this place?

Let us begin with Theodora. By 520, she had long given up performing as what Parisians of the Belle Epoque called a *grande horizontale*—the great horizontal ladies who were the super-mistresses of the time. Yet she kept in touch with the world of the circus factions that were central to life throughout the empire. This was no cause of shame to her. She came from a good enough background. She had not risen from the gutter, as Procopius implied. Her father had been the chief keeper of the bears of the Green Circus Faction. He was part of the urban scene—like a member of a worshipful company in London.

The circus factions were a peculiar institution. Though deeply rooted in their individual cities, each faction—some hundreds of young men, often from good families, who supported one side or the other in the chariot races—also formed part of an empire-wide association. Each was, as it were, a local chapter in an association whose main business was to praise the emperor. The emperor was the superstar acclaimed by the factions in every circus and, outside the circus, at every public ceremony.

What gave a special tingle to these demonstrations of loyalty was that they

were about chariot races. They were about skill and sheer luck. In the murderous scrum of the hippodrome only one side could win. And yet the emperor did not float above the races as a semidivine figure. In the hippodrome, he was still a Roman among other Romans. He was expected to follow with passion the fortunes of his own faction as any good old boy had done for centuries. As a result, every hippodrome, from Egypt to Constantinople, was like a giant roulette wheel. The emperor and his faction placed their stakes on a game of skill against blind fortune that condensed—and all too well—the swerving paths down which the emperor had taken the empire as a whole.

No wonder the factions (though looked down upon by bureaucrats and bishops alike) had to be constantly kept happy and in touch with the ruling powers. They were dark matter at its most potentially explosive. And so the young prince Justinian had made his way to Antioch to make contact with the local circus factions. “Their networks enabled him,” writes Potter, “to establish his own presence in the empire’s major cities.” And of all the former *grandes horizontales* available to him, it may have been no coincidence that Theodora, the daughter of a respectable bear keeper in Constantinople, was the one who knew the business of the circus inside out.

But what was it like to fall in love with Theodora, as the young Justinian plainly did? Here Potter presents a somewhat anemic view of Byzantine sex. The erotic poetry of the elites, which he cites, was schoolboy stuff. I think that one must go deeper to account for the impact of a woman such as Theodora.

There were many things that these courtesans were not. They were not Athenian *hetairai*, nor were they the geishas of Japan or the courtly ladies of medieval Europe. They did not bring feminine charm and gracious manners to their lovers. For these lovers were expected to have been groomed by the dominant male education associated with the notion of *paideia*, which encompassed high culture and much else. All the charm and poise they needed was passed on to them by older men—by magnetic rhetors and by teachers of the Greek classics.

What Justinian got from Theodora was not the art of gracious living. Nor was it simply sex. It was something far more primal. Popular lore made this plain. If a man stepped out of his house, it was considered very good luck if his first sight was of a courtesan. For such a woman foretold delight and abundance. She was a vision of the life force made real, just as the appearance of her opposites—black-robed priests or nuns—foretold chill death. In an age when the gods had barely died, to see Theodora was to glimpse a bountiful goddess in the full pride of her beauty. The legend of Pelagia—a courtesan turned saint—emerged in Antioch at just this time. In the description of Pelagia, as viewed by a gaggle of fascinated bishops, we have a hint of what Theodora could offer:

She then appeared before our eyes, sitting prominently on a riding donkey adorned with little bells and caparisoned; in front of her was a great throng of her servants and she herself was decked out with gold ornaments, pearls

and all sorts of precious stones, resplendent in luxurious and expensive clothes. On her hands and feet she wore armbands, silks and anklets decorated with all sorts of pearls, while around her neck were necklaces and strings of pendants and pearls. Her beauty stunned those who beheld her.

As the prostitute passed in front of us, the scent of perfumes and the reek of her cosmetics struck everyone in the vicinity. [And so Pelagia passed by, with magnificent indifference to normal conventions] with her head uncovered, with a scarf thrown around her shoulders in a shameless fashion, as though she were a man.¹



Sarah Bernhardt as Theodora, London, 1884

W&D Downey, London/Culver Pictures/Art Archive/Art Resource

What better living emblem of riches and delight to install (almost like a heraldic blazon) in the palace of a young prince?

But how had Theodora got to Antioch? Again, unconventional forces seem to have come into play. In between lovers, she needed protection. But this protection came not from the circus, but from the church. From 512 to 518 CE, the church of Antioch had been ruled by Severus, a charismatic intellectual of unbending views on the joining of God and humanity in Christ—views that were seen as out of step with the dogmas proclaimed at Chalcedon. He was widely admired for having got his science right. A correspondent of Severus “thought he saw the light of the divine torch shining in him.” Though chased from his see in 518 and declared a nonperson by the imperial government, Severus was one of those clouds of dark matter that had no place in the official self-image of the empire of Eastern Rome. In exile, he retained the magnetic power of a great dissident. Until his death in 538, the spider’s web of Severus’s correspondents and spiritual sons and daughters was unbreakable.

In 520, anti-Chalcedonian dissidents loyal to the memory of Severus in Antioch may well, Potter suggests, have

provided a sort of ecclesiastical women’s shelter for courtesans—a place where they could rethink their lives and plot new careers. It would have guaranteed the sincerity of Theodora’s conversion and would have supported her against judgmental public opinion.

Here I would add to the scenario sketched by Potter a vignette taken from the heavy pages of Eduard Schwartz’s edition of *Acts of the Ecumenical Councils*. Complaints against Peter, the bishop of Apamea, show that a sort of women’s shelter existed in his diocese. Peter, like Severus, was a staunch anti-Chalcedonian. In 518, the pro-Chalcedonian monks of the area went after him. They complained that Peter had baptized two leading courtesan-actresses—Maria and Stephané, known as “Flutter Feathers.” (Such names were common. At this time, even the pope was rumored to have had a mistress called Conditaria—“Spice Girl.”) The problem was that, once baptized, the two women did not conveniently vanish into the desert as the legend of Pelagia suggested that they should have done. They stuck around. They became part of the bishop’s entourage.²

One wonders whether Theodora, in Antioch, was indebted to Severus and his clergy for similar protection. In any case, she remained fiercely loyal to Severus for the rest of his life. In later years, he even provided the empress (whose eyes were failing) with manuscripts of his works, written in especially large Greek characters.

Once married, as we well know, Theodora and Justinian emerged from the world of dark matter to the brightly lit throne of Constantinople. Astonishing events ensued. In January 532, an attempt by the resident aristocracy of Constantinople to stage what we might call a “Byzantine Spring” was quashed. This took the form of the famous Nika riots. For a chilling moment, all the factions of the Hippodrome united against Justinian. The resident aristocracy set up an alternative emperor. For days on end, the roar of the firestorm of burning buildings up and down the central streets deafened the inhabitants. It was on the crucial morning of January 18 that Theodora intervened to insist that Justinian should not leave the city:

I shall never be separated from this purple, nor shall I live for a single day if those who encounter me do not call me mistress. If you wish to be saved, my lord, that is not a problem.... But...for me the old saying is best, that power is a splendid shroud.

Theodora’s stand worked. Having run riot in the lanes of the city, the populace of Constantinople obligingly flowed back into the Hippodrome, in order to witness the end of Justinian. But the Hippodrome was the one space where they could be trapped. The soldiers closed in. Thirty thousand men and women were said to have been killed. The resident aristocracy was broken. Eighteen major confiscations effectively put a stop to their “Byzantine Spring.”

And then, as we know, Justinian went on from strength to strength. In 533–534, he sent an army that conquered the coast of North Africa (in modern Tunisia and Algeria). At the same time, he issued the compendia of Roman law that came to be identified as the crowning achievement of the Roman Empire. Yet nothing of this extraordinary endeavor owed anything to Old Rome. It all took place far to the east, in Constantinople, under the guidance of the lawyer Tribonian, as Potter writes “one of the most influential figures in the history of Western legal thought.”

Most characteristic of all was Justinian’s rebuilding of the church of Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom). We know this building almost too well from innumerable photographs. We have to recover the thrill of those who first entered it. What had been burned down was a straightforward Roman basilica—a great barn of a place, straight as a ramrod with an apse at one end. What the inhabitants of Constantinople now got was a building that made the head swim. Every rule had been broken. The long side walls hinted at the clear lines of a basilica but, as in a dream, they were twice as high as any known church. Multicolored marble flowed down them like great waterfalls. At every corner of the building, where one might expect a clear right-angle bend, semicircular apses made the vast floor seem to dance. Over it all was a dome too big to be built (the locals told visitors from the provinces) without the help of an angel.

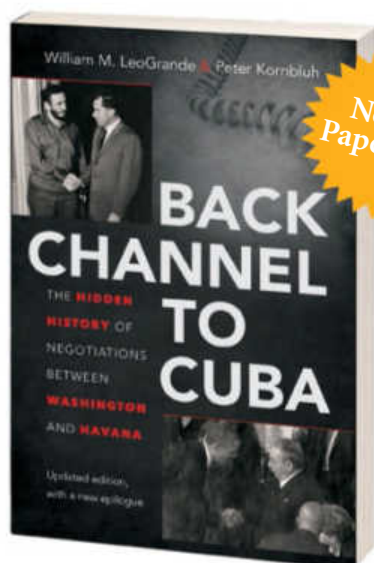
And so we come to Theodora’s last transformation. She emerged no longer as the lover of the emperor. Rather, she became the Virgin Mary to Justinian’s Almighty God. This was an evolution perfectly intelligible to Christian contemporaries. By giving her human flesh to form the body of Jesus and by filling Him with her human milk, Mary, as “Mother of God,” had kept the raw divinity in Christ human. She was the conductor that brought the suprahuman charge of God safely to earth. She was also the great principle of mercy. Only the Virgin could find wiggle room for condemned sinners.

And this is just what Theodora became in her last years. She was the silver lining in the dark cloud of Justinian’s autocracy. Like the Virgin, she was the one who could break the rules. She protected the followers of Severus. She protected prostitutes, providing them with a shelter. Known as the *Metanoia*—as the place of conversion—it was a testimony to the faith of the empress that, in her Byzantium, anything could change.

As she transformed herself, so she transformed the world. Potter makes plain that the problem posed to the biographer by the career of Theodora is how to deal with a person who defied convention and stereotype. But in the case of Justinian and Theodora, the problem for the biographer is only part of the problem for the historian of sixth-century Byzantium as a whole: how to deal with a vast and complex society—an entire ancient empire—that also, in its way, dived out of its accustomed frame. David Potter is to be warmly congratulated on having written a book that offers a gripping portrait of a remarkable woman that is also the portrait of a remarkable age. □

¹See the chapter on Pelagia in *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, translated by Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey (University of California Press, 1987).

²*Petition of the Monks of Apamea* (in 518) in *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum*, edited by Eduard Schwartz (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1940), pp. 106–109.



BACK CHANNEL TO CUBA

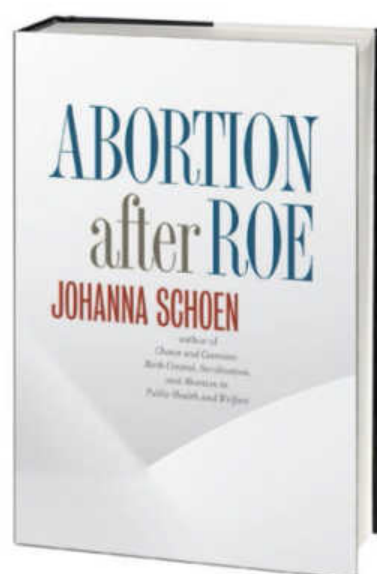
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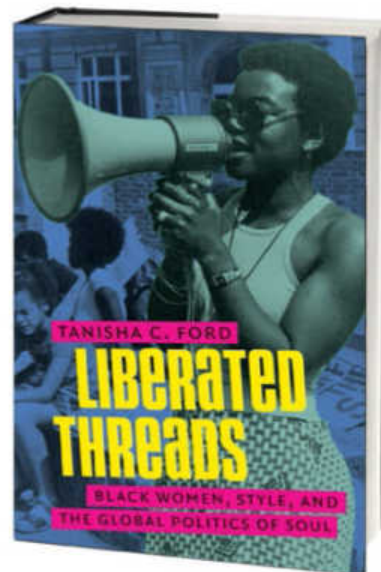


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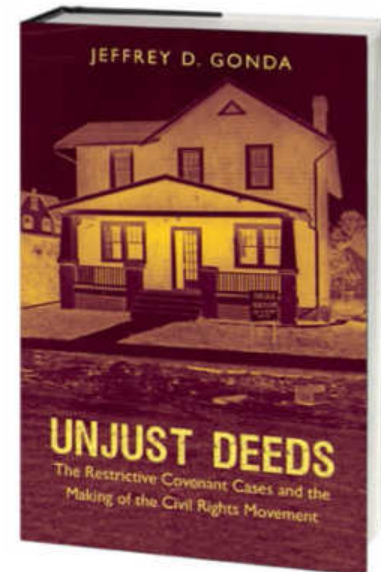
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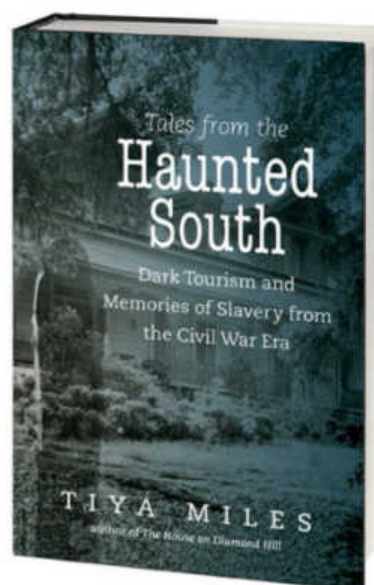
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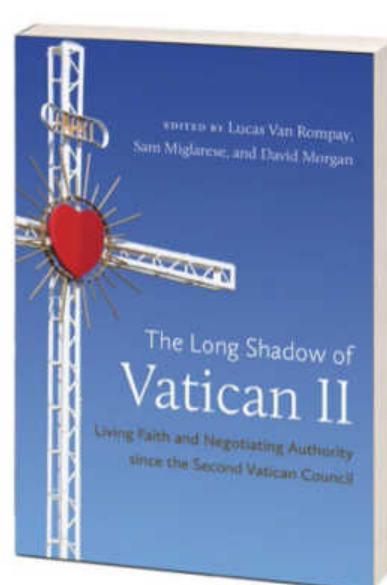
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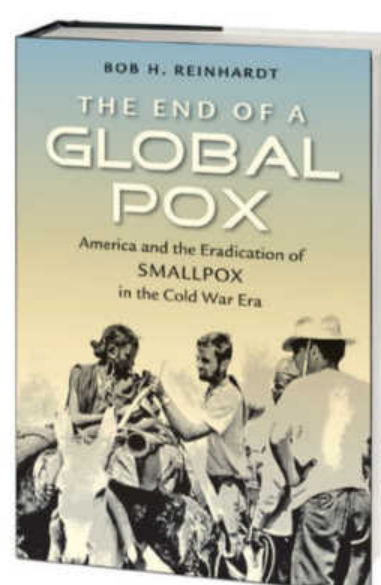
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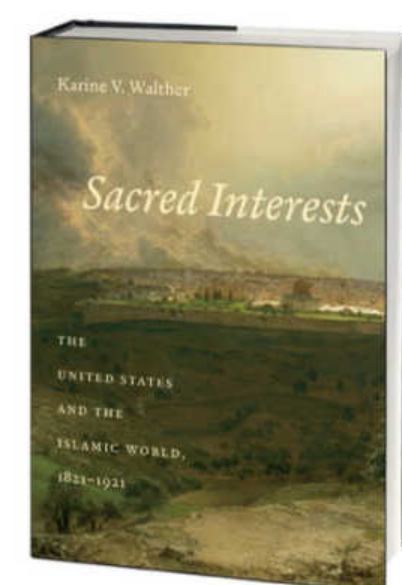
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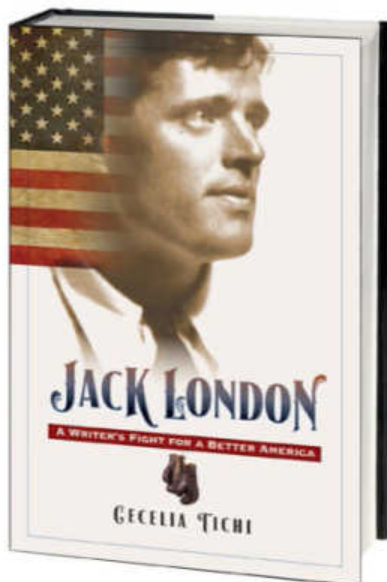
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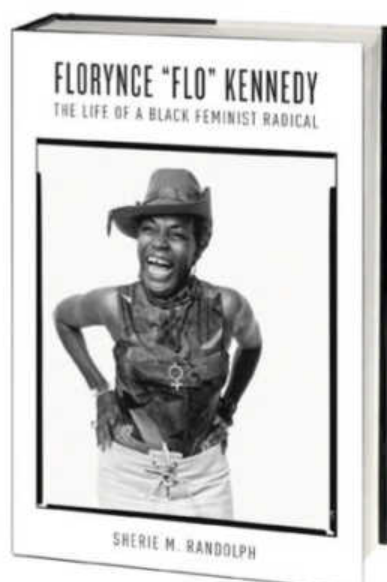
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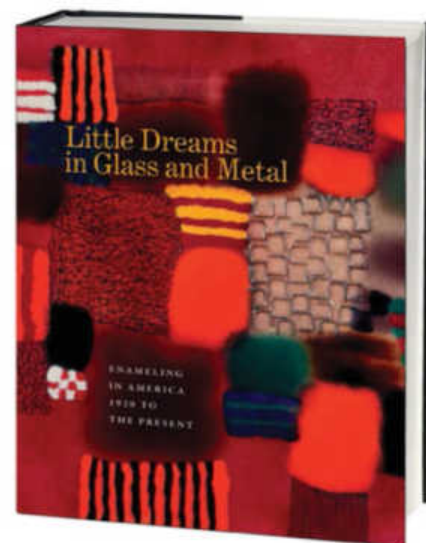
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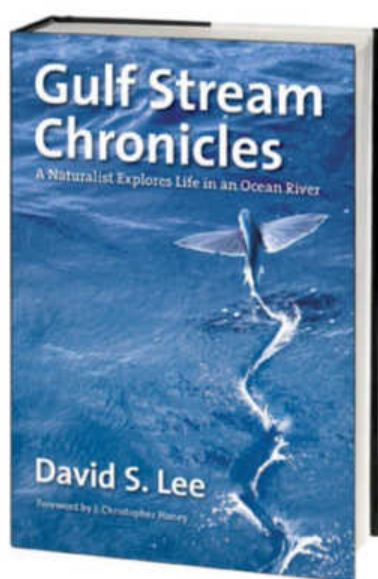
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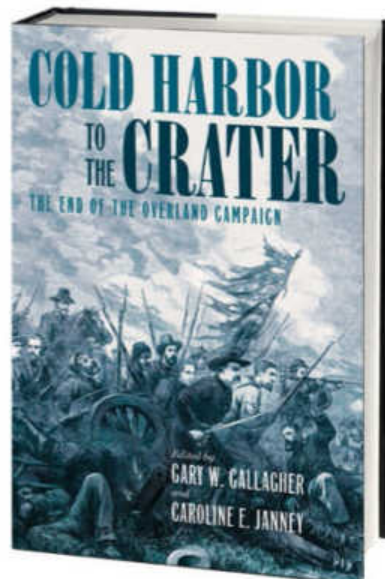
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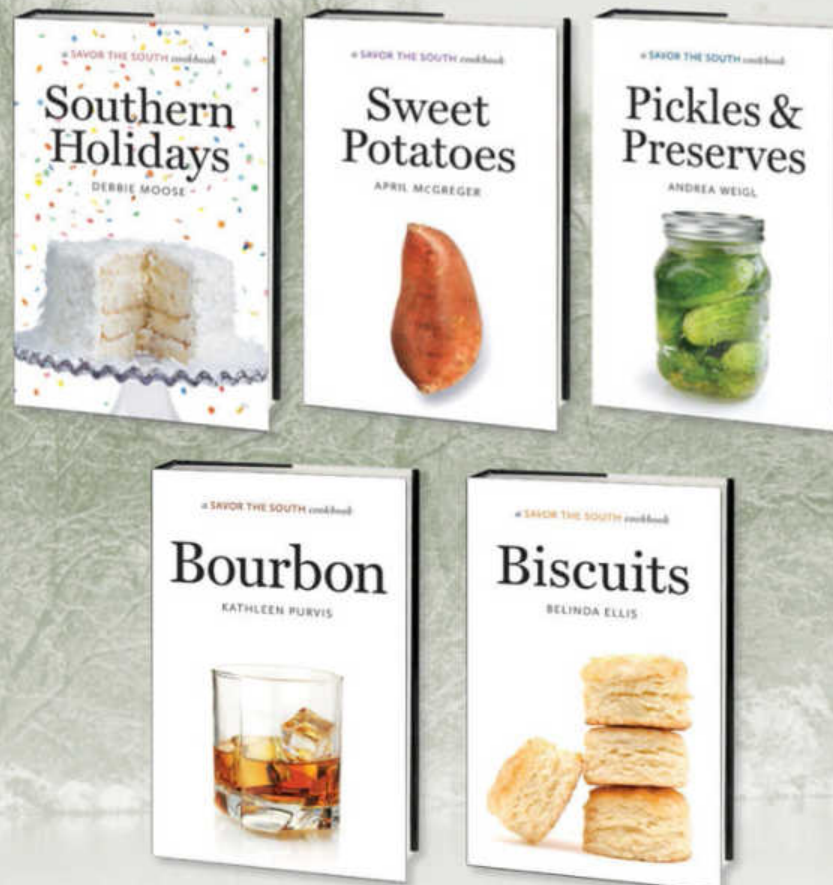
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The Cure for Corporate Wrongdoing: Class Actions vs. Individual Prosecutions

Jed S. Rakoff

**Entrepreneurial Litigation:
Its Rise, Fall, and Future**
by John C. Coffee Jr.
Harvard University Press,
307 pp., \$45.00

In 2009, the Securities and Exchange Commission charged that the top executives of Bank of America, in connection with asking their shareholders to approve the bank's \$50 billion acquisition of Merrill Lynch, defrauded those shareholders by failing to reveal the full extent of Merrill's huge and growing losses and by secretly agreeing to pay Merrill's executives year-end bonuses of up to \$5.8 billion. That is, the SEC charged that the bank was obliged by law to reveal these important facts to its shareholders and did not. If the shareholders had known these facts, they might have voted against the acquisition.

The SEC, which sued only the bank and none of its executives, settled the case in early 2010 for \$150 million, to be paid to the defrauded shareholders. Meanwhile, however, a private class action on behalf of those same shareholders was brought against the bank and certain of its officers and directors, based on the same allegations. To mount such a suit requires considerable effort, usually undertaken and financed by law firms that specialize in such cases. The class action was settled in 2012 for \$2.4 billion, or sixteen times the SEC settlement.

At first glance, this would suggest that the private class action was a much better vehicle for bringing justice to the victims of the alleged fraud (which the bank and its management "neither admitted nor denied") than the relatively paltry efforts of the SEC. Many other similar cases over the past two decades would seem to suggest the same. For example, in 2002, the SEC settled its fraud cases against Enron for \$450 million, while the parallel class action was settled for \$7.2 billion, or again about sixteen times the SEC settlement.

More recently, in 2010, the SEC settled for \$75 million its case against Citigroup for concealing the riskiness of the securitized mortgages sold by the bank, while the parallel class actions were settled for \$1.3 billion, or more than seventeen times the SEC settlement. In an even more extreme example, the SEC in 2006 settled its fraud case against Tyco—in which two executives were shown to have illegally taken \$600 million—for \$50 million while the parallel class action was settled for \$3.2 billion, or a full sixty-four times the SEC settlement.

But the story is not quite that simple. In most such class action suits, the monies awarded to the victim shareholders are paid not by the executives responsible for the frauds, but by the companies themselves—which means, in effect, by the current shareholders (or, if the company is in bankruptcy, by its secured creditors).

These current shareholders (or other stakeholders) are as blameless for the fraud as the shareholders they are pay-

ing. Indeed, in many instances they are classic small shareholders who purchased their shares before the fraud (and are therefore not part of the plaintiff class) and held on to their shares not only throughout the period of the fraud but thereafter. Unlike hedge funds, which are more adept at getting in and out of an investment, these "retail" investors are now punished twice for the fraud they had no role in committing, first by the decline in the value



Lithograph by Honoré Daumier, 1847

of their shares upon the fraud's exposure and second by the large payments subsequently made by the company they own to settle the class action.

From this standpoint, many securities class action settlements have a circular quality—one group of innocent shareholders paying another group of innocent shareholders—and the prime beneficiaries appear to be the lawyers who brought the cases and who typically receive very large fees in return. In the Tyco case the lawyers obtained \$464 million of the \$3.2 billion settlement. In the Bank of America case the plaintiffs' lawyers received over \$150 million in fees, plus another \$8 million in expenses.

As one might infer from these examples, class actions are among the most controversial forms of litigation in the United States today. To their advocates, they provide an opportunity for interested private citizens to have a meaningful role in combating corporate misconduct, to serve in effect as "private attorney generals," supplementing or even substituting for inadequate regulatory oversight. To their detractors, however, class actions are not much more than a racket, doing little to penalize the executives responsible for the alleged misconduct and chiefly serving, instead, to line the pockets of self-interested lawyers, who get a large share of the settlements.

Two recent trends exemplify these competing views. On the one hand,

Congress and the Supreme Court have repeatedly taken steps in the past two decades to limit class actions substantially, though not to eliminate them entirely. On the other hand, foreign governments, which had long regarded class actions with suspicion, have over the past decade or so begun to recognize their benefits, so that no fewer than twenty-one countries now permit class action lawsuits to be brought at least in some circumstances.

What has been largely missing from this debate over the merits and demerits of class action litigation is a judicious appraisal of its strengths and weaknesses, unaffected by ideological biases. That gap has now been filled by the publication of *Entrepreneurial Litigation* by John C. Coffee Jr. A Columbia Law School professor, Coffee has long been regarded as perhaps the preeminent expert on US securities law, but his book is not limited to securities class actions. Rather, it covers the full spectrum of class actions, including mass tort class actions, employment discrimination class actions, antitrust class actions, consumer class actions, merger and acquisition class actions, and much more. Not only is the book more comprehensive than prior studies of class actions, it also probes more deeply, placing today's class actions firmly within the setting of the modern trend toward turning the practice of law ever more into a business. Perhaps most impressively, Coffee's book offers specific prescriptions (the most original of which is discussed below) for reducing the weaknesses of modern class action litigation while enhancing its strengths.

Coffee begins by tracing the rise of class actions in the US. The general reader—and his book is aimed at the general reader—may be surprised to learn how recently that rise has occurred. While there were vague precedents going back to medieval times, and more specific US provisions dating from 1842, a real need for class actions was not perceived until the rise of large

corporations and mass production. A mass-produced product with a hidden defect, for example, might not be worth the price paid for it, but no reasonable purchaser was about to spend hundreds of dollars in legal fees to recover the few dollars she had been, in effect, overcharged. She had what Coffee terms a "negative value" claim. Yet if the defective product had been sold to several million purchasers, the collective economic injury was considerable.

Legal systems might deal with such collective injuries in any of several ways. For example, a legal system geared to a capitalist economy might choose to ignore such claims altogether, on the basis that one by one they were too "de minimis" to be worth the expenditure of legal resources, while collectively they would cause the manufacturer to lose customers and so be "self-correcting" in the long term. Alternatively, a legal system geared to a welfare-state approach might create governmental administrative agencies with powers to regulate and discipline errant manufacturers.

The first approach was typical of most Western countries well into the nineteenth century, while the second approach came to greater prominence in the twentieth century; but neither was wholly satisfactory. The laissez-faire approach ignored the fact that many sophisticated frauds, such as those in financial markets, might go undetected for years, if not forever, in the absence of regulatory disclosure requirements. But regulation had its limitations as well, for regulatory agencies, in addition to being perennially underfunded and therefore unable to monitor more than a small fraction of those they were supposed to supervise, were constantly subject to political pressures and occasionally subject to being "captured" by those they were supposed to regulate.

A third alternative, the class action—by which a single consumer, shareholder, or the like could sue on behalf of all those injured by the corporate misconduct—originated in the United States, largely for historical reasons centered around the strategies of lawyers who specialized in litigation. Personal injury lawyers in the US had already introduced the concept of the "contingent fee," by which an impecunious but injured plaintiff could be afforded free legal services, in return for agreeing to pay the lawyer a sizable percentage of any monies obtained. Since the lawyer thereby assumed the risk and expense of a litigation loss, he was motivated to hedge his bet by bringing a large volume of cases, as did his fellow plaintiff's lawyers.

Thus, where a common injury was suffered by many individuals—as, for example, in the case of a prescription drug that caused undisclosed side effects—many similar cases would be brought in many different jurisdictions. This in turn created pressure on the courts to find a way to deal with the flood of separate but similar

cases. Different solutions were eventually devised, such as, for example, consolidating all separate but similar cases before a single judge in a single jurisdiction; but since the courts in the United States were split among numerous jurisdictions, this was a halfway measure at best when the alleged misconduct was national in scope.

An initial response at the federal level was to include a form of class action, modeled on an 1842 rule, in the code of federal civil procedure enacted in 1912, and this provision was broadened in 1938 during the Great Depression. But it was not until 1966 that the federal code of civil procedure was amended in a way that opened the door to class actions as we know them today. The driving force was that most intractable of all US problems: combating racial prejudice. In particular, the civil rights movement of the 1960s, to the extent that it sought reform by means of judicial rulings, could be effective only if those rulings benefited similarly situated black persons, i.e., the class of those affected by the racism the litigation was intended to correct, such as segregation in schools or exclusion from obtaining mortgages. Rule 23 of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure was accordingly modified to make it easier for a litigant to sue on behalf of all those similarly situated except for those who chose affirmatively to “opt out” (i.e., not to be covered)—and in the case of suits seeking injunctive relief, even them.

As the drafters of the amended Rule 23 intended, the number of class actions in the federal courts hugely increased in the years following the amendment. Less foreseen was that the increase would not be limited to civil rights cases. According to a study undertaken by the federal judiciary in the early 1970s, in 1972 there were 3,148 class actions pending in the federal courts, up nearly 20 percent from just the year before; but while about 43 percent of these were civil rights cases, another 20 percent were securities cases, and still another 10 percent were antitrust cases.

What was common to virtually all these cases was that they were “lawyer-driven.” Sometimes this was ideological in nature. Legal action groups—such as the NAACP’s Legal Defense Fund—would identify broad areas of concern and then seek out interested plaintiffs who, because they were personally affected, had standing to bring a class action to rectify the concerns. But more often the lawyers’ impetus was financial. By combining contingent fees with class actions involving monetary damages, lawyers created a situation where, if they were successful, the financial return to them could be huge. They were therefore motivated to investigate different kinds of commercial and financial misconduct and, once convinced that they had a case, seek out individual plaintiffs in whose names a class action could be brought.

Litigation originated by lawyers does not fit comfortably with the assumptions of most legal systems, including that of the United States. But in this instance it was thought to be justified by the concept of the “private attorney general.” At least since the time of the Civil War, various federal laws had provided “bounties,” i.e., financial incentives, for private parties to bring

actions that would supplement federal enforcement. Thus, the False Claims Act, enacted in 1863, provided that a private party could bring a lawsuit for a fraud committed against the federal government that the government itself had not yet detected; and if the case was successful, the private party could receive as much as 50 percent of the recovery. The Sherman Antitrust Act, enacted in 1890, guaranteed that victims of antitrust violations who successfully sued the violators would receive mandatory treble damages, plus their attorneys’ fees—the theory being that these rewards would both motivate antitrust victims to expose violations of which the government was not yet aware and enhance deterrence of violations even in those instances where the government had already discovered the misconduct.

Based on such precedents, proponents of private class actions argued that while the cases might be originated by lawyers, those lawyers—who had an incentive to ferret out misconduct not yet known to undermanned government regulators, as well as to supplement the deterrence provided in cases that “piggybacked” on government investigations—were serving the “established” role of private attorney generals.

Although critics have claimed that this argument is simply a rationalization for a system by which class action lawyers line their pockets, many judges with whom I have spoken have come to believe that, particularly in the civil rights matters that gave rise to the modern expansion of class actions, this rationale has a modicum of truth. For example, class actions against employment discrimination appear to have led to a considerable increase in minority hiring and promotion well beyond what would have likely occurred in their absence.

Even in non-civil rights cases, class actions have sometimes served to illuminate the magnitude of misconduct that otherwise went undetected or underprosecuted. Thus, as the cases cited at the outset of this article suggest, securities class actions, for all their limitations, have served to spotlight the substantial abuse evident in many recent cases of corporate misconduct that the SEC’s much more modest approach appeared to trivialize.

The problem, of course, is that the huge financial incentive provided to lawyers by combining class actions with contingent fee arrangements easily leads to abuses. One such abuse is a form of legalized extortion known as a “strike suit,” which takes advantage of the considerable cost of modern litigation and the perceived unpredictability of juries. A corporation facing a weak class action claim that nevertheless will cost millions of dollars to defend and, if somehow successful, will result in possible damages of hundreds of millions of dollars is motivated to settle the suit, even if the company has committed no wrong.

A related problem is that of collusion between the class action attorney and the company he is suing. In a weak class action case like the one just described, an unscrupulous attorney, recognizing the long odds or just wanting a quick buck, and secure in the knowledge that his free-riding client will agree to whatever the lawyer recommends, may be motivated not only to settle cheap but

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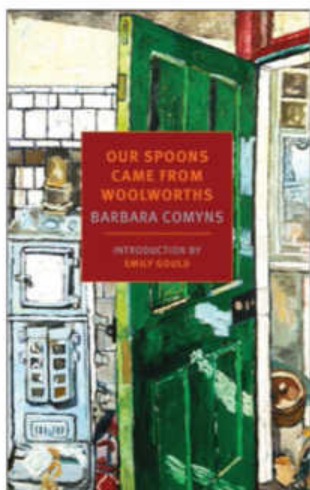
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OUR SPOONS CAME FROM WOOLWORTHS

Barbara Comyns

Introduction by Emily Gould
Paperback and e-book
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"I told Helen my story and she went home and cried." So begins *Our Spoons Came from Woolworths*. But Barbara Comyns's beguiling novel is far from tragic, despite the harrowing ordeals its heroine endures.

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Our Spoons Came from Woolworths is the November 2015 selection of the NYRB Classics Book Club.

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also to agree to terms binding on the class that will preclude future related litigation by lawyers and plaintiffs who might have much better cases—thereby saving the defendant a great deal of money down the road.

Much of the legislation and Supreme Court limitations on class actions in recent years have been directed at curbing such abuses, and Coffee is more optimistic than some that illegitimate suits have been substantially curtailed as a result. But he points to a more insidious problem. Even the best class action lawyers, as well as their clients, are primarily interested in suing the "deep pockets" from which they can recover the most money. In practice, this means focusing on the corporation, rather than the executives actually responsible for the misconduct.

To be sure, a few executives might also be named as defendants, but the settlement with them, if any, will typically be limited by the limits on their company-paid insurance. The big money will come from the settlement with the company. However, because of the circularity problem previously described, that money will effectively come from the pockets of innocent shareholders. Sometimes, as in the case of people who purchased both before and during the period of the fraud, they will even be the same shareholders who are suing—in effect, suing themselves.

It is hard to believe that the settlements in such cases have much of a deterrent effect on the individual executives who actually committed the alleged misconduct. This is why, in my view, class actions are no real substitute for criminal and regulatory prosecution of the individuals actually responsible for corporate misconduct. In recent years, however, such governmental prosecution of high-level executives has been notoriously rare. It is true that on September 9 of this year, the Justice Department—in reaction to public criticism of this failure—announced that prosecution of such individuals would be given priority "effective immediately," but only eight days later, on September 17, the Justice Department entered into a "deferred prosecution" agreement with General Motors for intentionally concealing a defective ignition switch linked to at least 169 deaths. Although those responsible for this purposeful concealment would seemingly be responsible, at a minimum, for manslaughter, no individuals were named.

Coffee, while also strongly advocating for more governmental action against individuals, proposes an interesting innovation that he thinks would make class actions more socially useful and less liable to abuse. Overall, he suggests making good on class action's promise of a "third way" by combining its profit-seeking tendencies with oversight of the class actions themselves by public agencies. Specifically, he proposes, among other reforms, that government regulators in matters where class actions are common should

employ private class action lawyers, on a contingent fee basis, to bring class actions supervised by the regulatory authority but for the benefit of the victims, to whom any recovery would be distributed.

As a result, the regulator could bring many more and bigger cases than it does currently and would be represented by lawyers with considerable expertise in suing large companies. The lawyers would be motivated by the contingent fee to achieve the best results. But at the same time, the government agencies overseeing the lawyers would have the power not only to prevent suits, but also

own staff in litigating these cases. He also acknowledges that his suggested approach might be subject to public and corporate criticism that it favored a particular part of the bar. For these and other reasons, I am not optimistic that Coffee's idea, good though it may be, will be widely adopted in anything like the near future.

But this hardly means that class action litigation will be the same tomorrow as it is today. A conservative majority of the Supreme Court remains skeptical that the benefits of the class action lawsuit outweigh its shortcomings, although they have refrained

from killing it altogether. At the same time, foreign nations, especially those with common law legal systems like Australia and Canada, have increasingly widened the opportunities to bring class actions, a clear recognition that they believe the class action serves important functions not otherwise served. But each country has its own variations. In Canada, if the plaintiff loses the case, he must pay the defendant's often considerable legal fees. And in Australia—which has the most robust class action bar outside the US—contingent fees are prohibited, but private companies, though not themselves plaintiffs, are permitted to fund such actions and thereby absorb the risk.

In short, class action litigation continues to evolve, all the while remaining highly controversial. To predict how it will operate even ten years from now, in the US let alone elsewhere, would be foolhardy. Its lucrative nature virtually guarantees that it will not disappear, short of judicial or governmental prohibition.

Nor is it likely that even a conservative judiciary or legislature will accept the nineteenth-century view that large groups of people who sustained losses that are individually too small to warrant their own lawsuits should be left with no remedy whatever.

How much class actions will actually serve as a private attorney general remains more questionable. Yet at least when it comes to securities class actions, this deterrence function should arguably be the chief measure of class actions' value—not the number of zeroes on settlement agreements that largely reflect a recycling of money from one innocent group of shareholders to another, sometimes overlapping group of innocent shareholders. The contrast between SEC settlements and private class action settlements, though revealing in its own right, should not obscure the real question of deterring future misconduct.

While I am personally persuaded, as is Coffee, that securities class actions do serve such a function, the proof is anecdotal and the extent of such deterrence may be quite modest. If the proponents of class actions cannot better perfect its use for this purpose, as for example by closer coordination between the government regulators and the class action bar, the "private attorney generals" will in effect be no better than private attorney privates. □

Enron Chairman Kenneth Lay with Uncle Sam



to direct that more attention be paid to pursuing individuals than at present. And the agencies would be more motivated than they currently are to pursue individuals along with the companies, since they could do so without any additional expenditure of their own resources. All this, moreover, could be achieved without new legislation.

In my view, this is a sound proposal. Indeed, as Coffee points out, some smaller governmental agencies, such as the FDIC, have already arranged for private attorneys to bring similar actions with the agency overseeing the cases but the lawyers being paid as a percentage of any money recovered. And while the proposal would pose more problems if undertaken by state and local agencies, where the selection of counsel would likely be affected by political considerations and campaign contributions, at the federal level agencies like the SEC enjoy sufficient independence that selection of counsel would likely be on the merits.

It must be acknowledged that Coffee had already floated this idea before publishing his book, but it failed to attract much support. Why is this? He suggests that big agencies like the SEC have too much invested in their self-image to acknowledge that private counsel could do a better job than their

The Commander of Civil War History

David S. Reynolds

Embattled Rebel: Jefferson Davis as Commander in Chief

by James M. McPherson.
Penguin, 301 pp., \$32.95

The War That Forged a Nation: Why the Civil War Still Matters

by James M. McPherson.
Oxford University Press,
219 pp., \$27.95

By early April 1865, the Confederacy was in free fall. William Tecumseh Sherman had cut a swath of destruction through Georgia and the Carolinas. On April 2, Ulysses S. Grant broke Robert E. Lee's line at Petersburg, Virginia. The next day Grant took Richmond, the Confederate capital. Abraham Lincoln arrived there on April 4 and was greeted by jubilant crowds of emancipated blacks.

Meanwhile, Jefferson Davis, the gaunt, austere president of the Confederacy, had joined the evacuation of Richmond and had fled to Danville, Virginia. But he had not lost faith in his cause. Davis issued a proclamation to the Southern people that stated confidently, "Nothing is now needed to render our triumph certain, but the exhibition of our own unquenchable resolve. Let us but will it, and we are free."

It was a desperate rallying call by a leader who would not accept defeat. Five days after Davis made it, Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox Court House. But Davis continued to cherish the Confederacy's ideals. Fifteen years after the war ended, he wrote that "African servitude" in the South had been "the mildest and most humane of all institutions to which the name 'slavery' has ever been applied."¹

Such ideas are so mistaken that it might seem that Davis should be dismissed as deluded. James McPherson invites us to adopt a more nuanced view in *Embattled Rebel: Jefferson Davis as Commander in Chief*. McPherson calls the Southern cause "tragically wrong" but adds, "I have sought to transcend my convictions and to understand Jefferson Davis as a product of his time and circumstances." Davis emerges in McPherson's portrait as a hands-on military leader who, despite several painful chronic illnesses, kept close watch on his generals, devised battle plans, and sometimes risked his life by visiting the front lines.

With his background as a West Point graduate and a successful colonel in the Mexican War, Davis at the start of the Civil War was far more deeply versed in military matters than his rival, Lincoln, who had no combat experience and who had to learn about war strategy on the go. That the North won the war had little to do with ineptitude on Davis's part. His choice of such generals as Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson made good sense, as did his "offensive-defensive" strategy, which involved concentrating his troops and attacking the enemy at key moments—a strategy that, as McPherson explains, Davis was forced to abandon through much of the

war in favor of a more dispersed, defensive position. The North's superior troop numbers, industrial strength, and firepower did not guarantee the South's defeat. Outmanned and outgunned forces can sometimes stand up to stronger powers, as shown by the American Revolution or the Vietnam War.

But one wonders how Davis could have kept up his spirits for so long. McPherson shows that he faced disagreement, spite, and insolence among several of his generals. As the Confederacy's battlefield losses mounted, he was blasted by rival politicians like Senator Louis Wigfall, who called him



James M. McPherson giving a tour of Shiloh National Military Park, Tennessee, 2008

"an amalgam of malice and mediocrity," and newspapers like the *Richmond Examiner*, whose editor declared that "every misfortune of the country is palpably and confessedly due to the interference of Mr. Davis." Yet Davis remained determined. He made some mistakes, but in the end, it was Grant's unrelenting attacks on Confederate armies along with Sherman's destruction of infrastructure, especially water systems, industry, and civilian property, that brought the South to its knees. McPherson concludes that "the salient truth about the American Civil War is not that the Confederacy lost but that the Union won."

Embattled Rebel is one more piece of the magnificent Civil War jigsaw puzzle that McPherson has been assembling for five decades. Other pieces are the twelve essays, eleven of which have previously appeared in various venues and formats, contained in his latest book, *The War That Forged a Nation: Why the Civil War Still Matters*. A distillation of many themes that McPherson has long pursued, *The War That Forged a Nation*, which contains autobiographical passages amid ruminations about history, leads us to consider his career as a historian and public intellectual.

Descended from two officers who fought for the North (but not, apparently, from the famous Union general James Birdseye McPherson), James M. McPherson was born in North Dakota, raised in Minnesota, and educated at Gustavus Adolphus College. He had little interest in the Civil War until he studied it as a graduate student under

C. Vann Woodward at Johns Hopkins. Just as Woodward's book *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955) was a catalyst of the civil rights movement, so McPherson developed an interest in Civil War radicals that reflected the Sixties' spirit of social protest. In his words, "parallels between the 1960s and 1860s, and the roots of events of exactly a century earlier, propelled me to become a historian of the Civil War and Reconstruction."

His doctoral dissertation on abolitionism led to the publication of his early books, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the*

Civil War and Reconstruction (1964), *The Negro's Civil War: How American Negroes Felt and Acted During the War for the Union* (1965), and *The Abolitionist Legacy: From Reconstruction to the NAACP* (1975). Woodward, as general editor of the multivolume *Oxford History of the United States*, invited McPherson to contribute to the series a book on the Civil War. McPherson, meanwhile, had bought a secondhand Olympia typewriter (it "was state of the art as of about 1970," he later joked) on which he would write many of his books, including the widely used textbook *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* (1982).

For Woodward's Oxford series, McPherson expanded the scope of his inquiry. The result was *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (1988), which told the history of the war and its backgrounds in a moving narrative. His originality lay in his deft synthesis of many aspects of the war—military, political, social, diplomatic, and economic—in a single book (a previous ambitious synthesis, Allan Nevins's *Ordeal of the Union* (1947–1971), consisted of eight volumes). While wide-ranging, *Battle Cry of Freedom* was neither unfocused nor meandering; it put the struggle over interpretations of slavery and freedom at the very heart of the war—a needed corrective to Civil War historians who had sidelined slavery in favor of other themes. McPherson also stripped the war of spurious romanticism by portraying it as a tragic failure of American politics, a war that caused more American deaths, proportional to population, than all other wars combined.

To the surprise of McPherson and his publisher, the nine-hundred-page book became a runaway best seller. The hardcover edition spent sixteen weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list, and the paperback version was on the list for another twelve weeks. Upward of three quarters of a million copies of *Battle Cry of Freedom* sold worldwide. Even now, some 15,000 copies sell each year. The book received rave reviews and won the Pulitzer Prize.

Success, however, brought new challenges for McPherson. He earned a chair professorship at Princeton, but there were signs of an academic backlash. A colleague warned McPherson of the risk of becoming a "popular historian" instead of a "historian's historian." McPherson received a letter from a University of Michigan Ph.D. candidate who asked, "Have you had occasion to feel that your public success has diminished your achievements in the eyes of fellow professionals?" McPherson wrote a piece on "Historians and Their Audiences," in which he posed the question, "What's the matter with history?" He noted the chasm between academic and popular historians. He might just as well have asked, "What's the matter with academe?" Every academic field has specialists who write for fellow specialists—what Eric Hayot calls twenty people writing for each other—while holding suspect scholars who have a wide appeal.

McPherson identified three main audiences for Civil War history: professional historians, who are especially interested in political and socioeconomic aspects of the war; Civil War buffs, who mainly enjoy reading about battles; and "general readers" or "the lay public" of the sort reached by Bruce Catton or Shelby Foote. McPherson is the rare case of someone who has managed to reach all three audiences. His sales have been strong, and despite occasional nitpicking by academics, the reviews of his books in scholarly journals have been largely favorable. His scholarship is at once rock-solid and accessible. He delivers prodigious research in clear prose.

Popular interest in the Civil War, which had been particularly high in the 1960s, subsequently waned until the appearance of McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom*, which was soon followed by Ken Burns's 1990 PBS documentary series *The Civil War*, which attracted more than 40 million viewers. Then came a plethora of books, articles, films, museum exhibits, battle reenactments, and discussion groups that kept the Civil War surge going. McPherson himself has contributed to the surge on many levels. He has continued to write monographs on war-related topics, including the motivation of Civil War soldiers (*What They Fought For, 1861–1865* and *For Cause and Comrades*), the Union and Confederate navies (*War on the Waters*), and Lincoln (*Tried by War* and *Abraham Lincoln*). He has produced essay collections—including *This Mighty Scourge, Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution*, and now *The War That Forged a Nation*—as well as a Civil War atlas, histories of individual battles, a collection of Civil War letters,

¹See Jefferson Davis, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* (D. Appleton & Co., 1881), Vol. 1, p. 78.

and history books for elementary and junior high schools. A lot of fine writing has come from the clattering keys of that old Olympia.

McPherson's influence on our understanding of the Civil War becomes especially visible when we compare him to historians of the 1930s and 1940s. Known as revisionists, these historians regarded the Civil War as needless or "repressible." In this view, the war was provoked by fanatical abolitionists and power-hungry Republicans whose denunciations of slavery stirred up the North and provoked the South to secede from the Union. The bloodbath that followed might have been avoided had tempers cooled and had slavery been allowed to die out on its own as a result of changing economic realities. Reconstruction, from this vantage point, was a brief period of nightmarish race-reversal in which blacks behaved in ways that threatened whites. Such attitudes were allegedly encouraged by nefarious Radical Republicans and followed by a justified reaction by Southern whites who reasserted their political and social dominance over African-Americans.

This interpretation of the Civil War was in time sharply attacked by a number of historians, including Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. and John Hope Franklin, but it was McPherson who most forcefully presented a very different picture of the war, one that is now widely accepted as standard. In his view, the Civil War was a moral struggle over slavery between two sections of the country that were driven by conflicting ideologies. The war represented the inevitable collision of opposing interpretations of liberty and revolution. In the North, liberty and revolution signified resistance to the Southern "slave power," which had controlled politics and defined America for much of the seven decades after the American Revolution. For the South, liberty meant the independence of the states, in which owning slaves was entirely legitimate and revolution meant a forceful rejection of a strong federal government that violated states' rights.

The two sides were led by presidents who embodied these opposing attitudes: Lincoln, who navigated among competing Northern groups while holding together the Union and working to emancipate America's four million enslaved blacks; and Davis, who endured internecine squabbling, a collapsing economy, and battlefield setbacks to keep alive the dream of a Confederate slaveocracy. Both presidents, McPherson argues, were, overall, sound military strategists who tested out several less-than-stellar generals before arriving at dependable ones.

McPherson emphasizes the role of contingency. There were times when a chance occurrence turned the tide of the war. Take the Battle of Antietam (Sharpsburg, to Southerners) in Maryland on September 17, 1862. The war's bloodiest battle, it was a military draw. But by stymieing Lee's invasion of the North, it boosted Union morale, led to Lincoln's issuance of the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, and may have prevented England's intervention on behalf of the South. This crucial battle was influenced by a Union corporal's accidental discovery of three cigars wrapped in what turned out to be Robert E. Lee marching orders—

an unexpected windfall for General George McClellan, who wired Lincoln, "I have the plans of the rebels, and will catch them in their own trap."²

As late as August 1864, the outcome of the war was so uncertain that Lincoln confided to his Cabinet that he would probably lose his bid for reelection in November. The subsequent aggressiveness of the Union army and navy, under Lincoln's guidance, led to his reelection and the North's triumph.

That triumph redefined America. As McPherson maintains, the "Union" of individual states was now an indivisible "nation." He argues that the war supplanted the old southern-defined vision of America with what he describes as the northern politico-economic system and the social values it generated.

Another outcome of the war was the notable strengthening of the federal government. Before the war, McPherson notes, the only federal agency that affected the average citizen was the postal service. Under Lincoln, the United States created a national currency, powerful federal courts, and the first federal income tax. Liberty itself took on new meanings. Between the 1789 and 1861, so-called negative liberty—freedom *from* something—permeated the national consciousness and shaped the first ten constitutional amendments, with their "shall nots." The Civil War brought about a shift to positive liberty, or freedom *to*. This shift was reflected in the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, which gave freedom and citizenship to millions of African-Americans in declarative phrases like "Congress shall have the power to enforce..." Positive liberty, McPherson notes, can open the way to justice, social welfare, and equality of opportunity.

McPherson's arguments about the Civil War may seem to be so plausible as to be unassailable. But he has faced questions on issues such as the violence of war, the actions of African-Americans and Lincoln, and the motivations behind the conflict.

On the question of violence, as he describes it in *The War That Forged a Nation*, McPherson stakes a middle ground between those who lament the war's allegedly gratuitous brutality and those who insist that the war was actually restrained. In answer to a historian who claims that Lincoln's "taste for blood" resulted in "unmitigated violence, slaughter, and civilian suffering," McPherson reasons that the aim of destroying slavery in fact necessitated what General Sherman called "the hard hand of war." Also, the roughly 50,000 civilian deaths that resulted directly or indirectly from the war amounted to about one fifteenth of soldier deaths, a relatively small proportion when compared with the collateral damage in large-scale European wars from the seventeenth century onward, in which twice to several times as many civilians died as soldiers.

To refute the opposite notion—that

the violence of the Civil War was in fact moderate—McPherson again uses comparative statistics. Even if we go with the old figure of 620,000 Civil War deaths (recently raised to an estimated 750,000), the 360,000 Union dead represented 1.6 percent of the population of the Union states, while the 260,000 Confederate dead constituted 2.9 percent of the Confederate population (including slaves). Proportionally, as he points out, such a death total today would be the equivalent of a staggering 8.8 million.

In his own books, McPherson does not frequently resort to what the historian John Keegan called the "Zap-Blatt-Banzai-Gott im Himmel-Bayonet in the Guts" approach to military history,



Abraham Lincoln, Washington, D.C., probably May 16, 1861; from *The Photographs of Abraham Lincoln*, edited by Peter W. Kunhardt Jr. and just published by Steidl and the Meserve-Kunhardt Foundation

with accounts of spilled intestines, spouting blood, brains blown out, and so on. While McPherson's emphasis on strategy and troop movements sometimes makes a battle seem more like a chess game than a slugfest, he has proven fully capable over the years of communicating the horrors of war in powerful, if understated, ways.

McPherson attributes the war's violence to a widely felt, passionate commitment to principle. Soldiers on both sides fought with genuine devotion to their respective causes. Here McPherson departs from previous historians like Bell Irvin Wiley, who maintained that both the rebels and the Yanks were spurred mainly by economics or community pressure, and Gerald Linderman, who contended that the grim realities of war stripped most soldiers of idealism. Having read thousands of soldiers' letters and diaries, McPherson finds that Southerners generally fought for duty and honor while Northerners were also impelled by duty and, increasingly, by a resolve to eradicate slavery.

Getting rid of slavery was naturally a strong motivation among the roughly 180,000 African-American soldiers who fought for the Union. But this

raises another issue. A number of historians maintain that American blacks were principally responsible for bringing about emancipation, not only because of the exemplary courage of black soldiers but also because of the thousands of enslaved people who took the initiative to escape from their masters and flee to the Union army, where they were liberated.

McPherson, who pioneered the study of African-Americans in the war, fully appreciates their contribution. But in *The War That Forged a Nation* he finds the self-emancipation thesis inadequate. He points out that had the Union armies not pushed progressively southward, enslaved people would have had no convenient destination to escape to. For McPherson, emancipation was the result of a combination of factors—the military aggressiveness of Lincoln and his generals, the rising antislavery sentiment in the North, and the commitment of many freedom-seeking Americans, black and white.

Lincoln does not go unscathed in McPherson's rendering. A military tyro at the start of the war, he misjudged a number of generals and condoned some wrongheaded battle schemes. But meditating on Lincoln over the years has led McPherson to adopt an increasingly positive view of him. Lincoln's choice of generals early on in part reflected his attempt to mobilize various constituencies for the war effort by appointing prominent political and ethnic leaders, such as the Tammany Democrat Daniel Sickles, the Irish-born Thomas Meagher, and the German-American politician Carl Schurz. Even George McClellan, whose exaggerated estimates of the size of rebel armies limited his battlefield effectiveness, was an initially understandable choice, given his skills at preparing troops and his great popularity among soldiers. With regard to battle strategy, Lincoln, after some initial stumbling, came to espouse the effective one of potent assaults on Confederate

forces combined with the destruction of Southern infrastructure and resources.

In response to those who, citing occasional racist pronouncements by Lincoln, argue that the president was a thoroughgoing bigot, McPherson shows that his racism was more apparent than real. In order to get elected and then hold together the many competing factions in the North, Lincoln tailored his public declarations on race and slavery carefully so as not to appear extreme. At the same time, he did not show hostility toward African-Americans when he met with them privately, as was testified by two prominent visitors to the White House, Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, who found a unique absence of racism in him.

"All subjects are infinite," Herman Melville wrote when he was at work on *Moby-Dick*. "The trillionth part has not yet been said; and all that has been said, but multiplies the avenues to what remains to be said." Melville, were he around today, would surely concede that more than a trillionth part has been said about the Civil War. But one can envisage new kinds of Civil War history that explore many aspects

²See McPherson, *Crossroads of Freedom: Antietam* (Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 107–109.

of culture that McPherson does not consider. For instance, he rightly states that Harriet Beecher Stowe's best-selling antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) "may have done more to arouse antislavery sentiments in the North and to provoke angry rebuttals in the South than any other event of the

antebellum era—certainly more than any other literary event."³ He does not discuss much other war-related fiction

³See McPherson, *Drawn with the Sword: Reflections on the American Civil War* (Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 24.

or the numerous poems, plays, songs, reform tracts, and other cultural material that, were they integrated into a full history of the war, would enhance our understanding of it. But McPherson, through his energetic research, unflagging curiosity, and extraordinary breadth of scope, has

opened the way for such work.

Walt Whitman declared that the ground for his poetry volume *Leaves of Grass* was well "ploughed and manured" by others. The Civil War ground has been expertly prepared by many remarkable historians—none more remarkable than James McPherson. □

On Ancestor Apes in Europe

Steven Mithen

The Real Planet of the Apes: A New Story of Human Origins

by David R. Begun.
Princeton University Press,
246 pp., \$29.95

How many apes do you know? I don't mean as individuals but as types, or if you wish to be scientific about it, as genera: subdivisions of biological families. Well, I'm sure you can name the chimpanzee (which has the generic name *Pan*) and the gorilla (*Gorilla*) for the African apes, and they are indeed the only two African genera that exist, with three or four species within each. I suspect you will name the orangutan (*Pongo*, two species) and probably the gibbon (*Hylobates*, twelve species) as Asian apes.

I would certainly hope you appreciate our evolutionary heritage and list humans (*Homo*, one species) as another type of ape, but I would be concerned if you mentioned baboons, mandrills, capuchins, marmosets, or howlers, all of which are types of monkeys and quite different from apes. I'd be impressed if you named the siamang, which is in the same family as the gibbon, the Hylobatidae, otherwise known as the lesser apes, and provides a further three genera (*Nomascus*, *Hoolock*, and *Symphalangus*). You couldn't get any further, at least with apes alive today, because there simply aren't any more to name. But you'll probably be familiar with *Australopithecus* as an extinct ape genus to which Lucy, *Australopithecus afarensis*, belonged some 3.5 million years ago (MYA). And if you follow the human evolution literature you might even cite *Ardipithecus* from 4.4 MYA.

Forgetting about the siamangs, the other seven types of ape—*Homo*, *Pan*, *Gorilla*, *Pongo*, *Hylobates*, *Australopithecus*, and *Ardipithecus*—were all that I could have confidently mentioned before becoming familiar with *The Real Planet of the Apes*. I might have stumbled over a couple of other challenging names, *Ramapithecus* and *Sivapithecus*, vaguely recalled from student lectures in the early 1980s about their controversial part in human evolution. But within the pages of David Begun's book, primarily concerned with the Miocene world between 23 and 5 MYA, I've now encountered no fewer than fifty genera of apes, ranging from *Aegyptopithecus* at 33 MYA from Egypt to *Indopithecus* at 6 MYA from Pakistan, and eventually *Gigantopithecus*, an ape the size of a polar bear that dwelt in the forests of Southeast Asia until a mere 300,000 years ago. And that is probably just half the number of ape genera that have existed on earth.



A model of *Homo naledi*, a newly discovered species of ape, at the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site, Maropeng, South Africa, September 2015

I trust that David Begun, professor of anthropology at the University of Toronto, could have reeled off all fifty tongue-twisting pithecus names without any deviation, hesitation, or repetition. He is a world-leading authority on ape evolution and has gotten to know many of them as intimately as one can by literally pulling them out of the ground, poking about in their nasal cavities, and meticulously measuring their finger bones to write what has been (lovingly) described as one of the most boring academic papers of all time. His new book is enthralling, making accessible an absolutely critical period of human evolution and the scientific debates surrounding the interpretation of its evidence—including his own controversial thesis.

The last two decades have seen a plethora of books about human evolution, many written by leading anthropologists and often quite superb at expounding the last six million years of evolution, taking the common human-chimpanzee ancestor as their starting point. They typically move swiftly to the appearance of the *Homo* genus in Africa with its Oldowan stone tool technology at two million years ago. They continue with the study of bipedalism, brain enlargement, extended life history (notably childhood), and Old World dispersal. They explain the diversification into multiple species of the *Homo* genus, including *H. ergaster*, *erectus*, *heidelbergensis*, and *neanderthalensis*, and how advances in evolutionary genetics are helping us to understand the relationships between the most recent of these species. As

indeed are new finds, as the discovery in 2013 of *Homo naledi* testifies (it was announced to the world in September 2015). Hence these books will keep flowing. Typically, they end with the evolution of symbolic thought and language, either as a slow burn or a transformational event. *Homo sapiens* is left alone as the only living member of our genus, which is gradually pushing the few other remaining apes into extinction by its reckless behavior.

These accounts are fine but increasingly seem inadequate, or at least only part of the story. The more we learn about our ape cousins—their tool-making, social intelligence, communication skills, complex social behavior, and cultures—the more it appears that much of natural selection's work for human evolution had been undertaken long before the time of not only the common human-chimpanzee ancestor but also those ancestors we shared with the gorilla at about 10 MYA and the orangutan at about 15 MYA. While the brain of the chimpanzee and the australopithecines may be three times smaller than our own, their brains are nevertheless more than three times larger than what is expected for a mammal of their body size. So an evolutionary trajectory had been set many millions of years before *Homo* emerged.

For a complete story of human origins we must look back in time to at least thirty million years ago. Begun begins his account at Fayum, now located in the desert of northern Egypt but then amid a coastal subtropical forest. It contained an astonishing assortment of animals, some that would appear familiar to us and some quite strange, including elephants the size of cows, crocodiles,

turtles, and whales with arms and legs. In the trees sat *Aegyptopithecus*, looking like a cross between a monkey and a lemur, picking and peeling ripe fruit. This primate, known from an assortment of fragmentary fossils, is likely to resemble the common ancestor between Old World monkeys and apes, their evolutionary divergence being dated by the molecular genetic clock at thirty-one to thirty-eight million years ago.

That does indeed mark an appropriate starting point. Although monkeys are certainly both clever and adaptable, apes—at least those alive today—are an order of magnitude more intelligent. Apes live longer. They have more complex societies and bigger brains. They provide an irresistible comparison to humans, having the same body plan of straight backs and long arms that evolved for "suspensory" movement—hanging from branches. They alone have a female menstrual cycle (monkeys have a seasonal reproductive cycle) and habits of using tools and building nests—ours being far more elaborate in scale and style, but in principle just the same. We are indeed merely a type of ape, the only one that uses bipedal walking as its primary locomotion rather than swinging from branch to branch, leaving monkeys to walk on all fours along the tops of branches.

Fayum at 33 MYA provides the start and Ethiopia at 4.4 MYA the end of Begun's account, this taking us to *Ardipithecus*, which lived immediately prior to the spread of the australopithecines, which is when most accounts of human evolution begin. To understand what happened between these two African localities we have to travel via Europe because that is where, Begun proposes, much of the evolutionary action occurred.

This will sound like heresy to some. After an undistinguished and quite frankly racist history of Eurocentric research throughout much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we have all become at ease with being "Africans." Hasn't the fossil, archaeological, and genetic evidence convincingly demonstrated that Charles Darwin was correct when he proposed in his *Descent of Man* (1871) that "it is somewhat more probable that our early progenitors lived on the African continent than elsewhere"?

Well, yes, with regard to *Homo sapiens*, for we all descend from populations that dispersed from Africa a mere 70,000 years ago—with a tiny contribution from a few Neanderthals and others. But where did those early African progenitors come from? From European

apes, Begun proposes, apes that dispersed into Africa around ten million years ago already having the relatively big brains and extended life histories that, after further elaboration, would become a distinguishing feature of the *Homo* genus. So while Africa may have been the cradle of humankind, Europe had been its birthing pool.

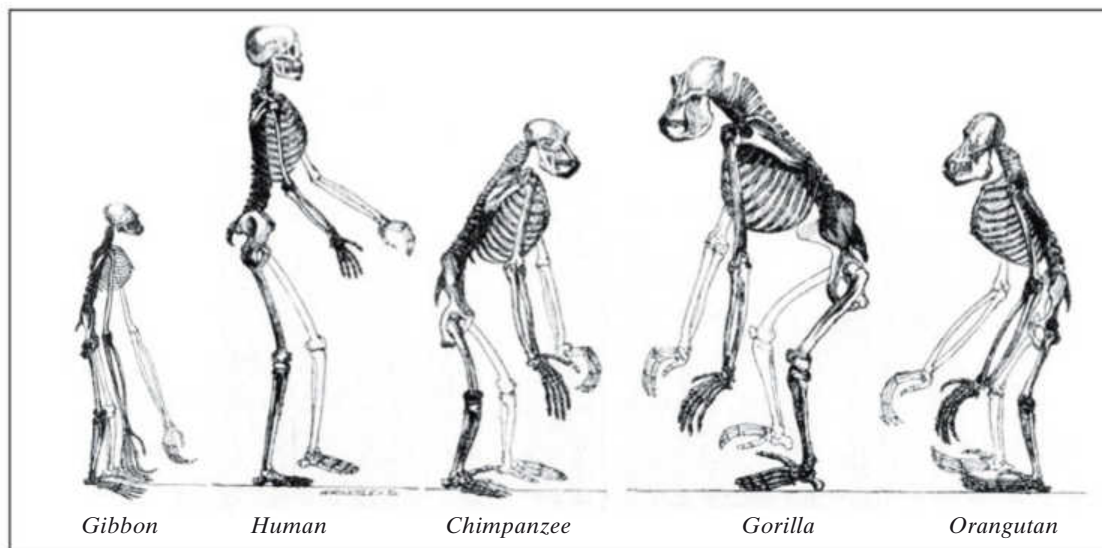
“Europe,” of course, is a problematic term for a northern segment of the Miocene world, which existed between circa 23 MYA and circa 5 MYA. This was the segment that was undergoing transformation by tectonically driven mountain building that created the Alps, Pyrenees, and Zagros. As with “Africa,” we cannot read the word “Europe” without thinking of the cultural construct that this term represents today and the history of its relations with Africa. When the evolutionary story includes accounts of “migrations” and “dispersals,” there is a resonance with events happening today as refugees flee into Europe from Syria and North Africa that is almost overwhelming, but, of course, hugely misleading. For here we are dealing with evolutionary time, millions of years, with the fossil record providing no more than tiny and very occasional glimpses of what was happening within the Miocene world.

Before “Europe” became center stage, the apes themselves had to reach that northern land-mass. For the first 16 million years they remained entirely in Africa and provide a fascinating cast of characters within an evolutionary story of diverse adaptations. I say “characters,” but they all have no more than bit parts, some of which are very bitty indeed. *Kamoyapithecus*, for instance, found in Kenya and dating to 26 MYA, is known only from a fragment of upper jaw and a few isolated teeth, while *Rukwapithecus*, from the same locality, has (so far) left us with no more than a lower jaw. Teeth and jaws are indeed the most prominent finds because of their durability, with the tiny humps and bumps on the molars and the dental characteristics—the number of incisors, canines, premolars, and molars—being absolutely critical to identifying the dietary behavior and evolutionary affiliation of the find.

Paleoanthropologists have the enormous challenge of using such dental minutiae to reconstruct the evolutionary relationships between one fossilized jaw and another, separated by millions of years. When bits of limb bones are found, proposals can be made for posture and mobility, the shift to an upright posture and brachiation—swinging from branches—being critical evolutionary transitions. Paleoanthropological heaven is when jaw and limb fragments are found together. This is the case for *Morotopithecus* from Uganda, dating to around 20 MYA, which generously left behind a jaw, a couple of vertebrae, a shoulder blade, and a hip joint. When put together they create a curious ape that appears dentally primitive but advanced in posture, indeed not very different from the way modern apes move around in trees. The dilemma we face, however, is whether the bits and pieces should actually go together at all. They might derive from several different

types of apes from different time periods that have become aggregated into the same geological deposit, leading paleoanthropologists to create no more than an imaginary Miocene chimera.

I don’t blame them for a few accidents like that. Begun is refreshingly open about the speculation and imagination sometimes required within his science, and the mistakes that have been made. Another unavoidable but irritating habit of paleoanthropologists is that they change their minds about what genus a fossil belongs to or what it should be called. One of the earliest African ape fossil discoveries (1933) was named *Proconsul* (a name unfortunately inspired by a popular performing chimpanzee of the time called Consul) dating to 19 MYA. Some specimens of *Proconsul* have now been renamed as *Ekembo*. Far from being a bit player, *Ekembo* is known from



almost every bone in its body and evidently looked and behaved much like a monkey—with the exception of lacking a tail. This lack of a tail is a distinguishing sign of an ape, or more accurately one should refer to the presence of a tailbone, the coccyx. Quite why tails were dispensed with is unknown but Begun manages to weave a marvelous evolutionary story that connects the loss of the tail to the evolution of spoken language, which is speculation and imagination being put to very good use.

This appearance of a new type of ape, *Afropithecus*, at 17.5 MYA, brings to its climax what Begun calls the first “golden age” of apes or near apes of the African early Miocene. The hugely fortunate find of a baby’s jaw enabled the age at which *Afropithecus*’s first molar erupted to be estimated. This is probably the most important measurement that can be made because it correlates with a range of attributes that are otherwise impossible to observe, including life span, age at menarche, lifetime number of offspring, and brain size. While the age of eruption of the molar in *Proconsul* has been estimated to be the same as in modern-day monkeys, that of *Afropithecus* was found to be intermediate between monkeys and apes, suggesting a relatively larger brain size and a longer period of infant dependency and learning.

That innovation in life history together with new dietary adaptations might have been critical for the dispersal of apes from Africa into Eurasia, occurring soon after the appearance of *Afropithecus*. The route taken was from East Africa and Saudi Arabia, this being made possible by the breakup of the vast early-Miocene Tethys Sea that had stretched from the Atlantic to the

Indian Ocean. As this broke up, land bridges were created, utilized not just by apes but by a host of other land mammals to disperse north from Africa.

The first apes in Europe are grouped together as griphopiths, described by Begun as the first “hominids”—the group that today contains only the great apes: *Pongo*, *Gorilla*, *Pan*, *Australopithecus*, *Ardipithecus*, and *Homo*. This is to be distinguished from the “hominoids,” encompassing all the apes (including the gibbons and siamangs) and the “hominines,” which contains just the African apes and their descendants (and hence humans). Finding the first hominid fossil sounds momentous and Begun provides an evocative description of what its location at Engelswies in Germany would have been like 17 million years

ago—constantly changing topography of valleys, highlands, and coastlines. Indeed around 12 million years ago a fundamental divergence in ape evolution occurred, creating two lineages: the Asian pongines, from which the present-day orangutan derives, and the African hominines, although the latter were at this time located in Europe, not Africa.

The Asian evidence is especially complex and has suffered from what Begun describes as a spectacular amount of taxonomic shuffling as paleoanthropologists changed their minds about species and genus names. The most sorry—but fascinating—saga concerns *Ramapithecus* and *Sivapithecus*—the controversy I had vaguely recalled when first picking up Begun’s book. You’ll have to read it to understand that story but it captures many of the challenges bravely faced by paleoanthropologists that pervade the interpretation of almost every fossil they find. Are two fossils of the same geological age and locality different in their dentition and brain size because they are from different species, or because they are the male and female or the juvenile and adult of the same species? Conversely, have the similarities in fossils from different time periods and/or localities been inherited from a common ancestor, which would be informative about their evolutionary relationship, or have they arisen by parallel evolution, the two species adapting to similar ecological pressures in similar ways but in complete isolation from each other?

Even before these challenges arise there are those concerning what the specimen looked like prior to the deformation and fragmentation during the process of fossilization. Begun provides examples of when he has taken fossils apart and glued them together again to correct past mistakes. Then there is the question of dating the fossils, especially those recovered prior to today’s meticulous documentation of the locations of discoveries and geological deposits. And then there are three challenges epitomized by the *Ramapithecus-Sivapithecus* saga: the temptation to “big-up” one’s find as being transformative to our understanding of human evolution (e.g., as Louis Leakey did in 1967) and the likelihood that new fossil discoveries will prove you wrong. While we all pay lip service to the desirability of falsification, we hate it when it happens and often try to deny it. The third challenge is that molecular biology is ultimately much better at deriving evolutionary relationships than paleoanthropologists can ever be at measuring the humps and bumps on fossils.

Back to the evolutionary story. As the Asian apes were evolving toward the orangutan and the now extinct *Gigantopithecus*, strangely known only from giant molars—its limb bones possibly are sitting in museum basements misclassified as those of a bear—the European apes were evolving along a different track. *Dryopithecus*, the “oak-forest ape,” was one of the first discovered in 1856, just three years before the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, as a collection of fossil fragments at a spot in the foothills of the Pyrenees. The eminent French paleontologist and archaeologist Édouard

Lartet interpreted the fragments as deriving from a chimpanzee-like creature, which we now date to around 12.5 million years ago.

Darwin was aware of the discovery and followed his much-cited statement about African origins in *The Descent of Man* by noting *Dryopithecus* and the possibility of ape migration from Europe into Africa. That is manna for Begun—Darwin being everyone’s ultimate authority to support a theory. With a considerably larger number of fossil fragments, he now describes *Dryopithecus* as having been a combination of an orangutan, as identified by its skill in the trees, a chimpanzee, as identified by its diet, and a gorilla, according to the anatomy of its face. It was another of natural selection’s intriguing experiments.

It was from *Dryopithecus* that genera of apes evolved in Europe with distinctively African ape characteristics. By ten million years ago *Hispanopithecus* was swinging from branches in the subtropical forests of what is now Spain, its fossilized limb bones indicating that it moved around in a manner similar to modern-day apes, while fragments of crania indicate African-looking sinuses and brow ridges. At a similar date *Rudapithecus* was hanging out in Hungary, as is evident from its limb bones, digits, and fossilized inner ear that indicates the well-developed sense of balance required by suspensory primates. *Rudapithecus* also left behind a relatively well-preserved cranium with most of the face and brain case attached, a fossil known as Gabi—paleoanthropologists like to give their finds nicknames. Gabi is the earliest evidence for a chimpanzee-sized brain in the ape fossil record, suggesting that this brain expansion occurred in Miocene Europe.

It is the descendants of apes such as *Hispanopithecus* and *Rudapithecus* that—Begun argues—dispersed into Africa around nine million years ago, providing the evolutionary foundation for the present-day African apes and the species that became the global ape, *Homo sapiens*. Why did they go to Africa? Because beginning fifteen million years ago Europe had been becoming cooler, drier, and more seasonal, conditions unsuitable for apes but ideal for monkeys. So the apes moved out, heading south into Africa, and a population of monkeys moved into Europe.

Critical to Begun’s thesis is that between 12.5 and 9.5 million years ago Africa was effectively devoid of apes. The fossil record is indeed remarkably sparse, leaving an evolutionary gap between the relatively abundant early Miocene apes and those that evolved after 7 million years ago and that are evidently on the course to *Australopithecines* and *Homo*. Most notable are *Sahelanthropus tchadensis* at 7–6 MYA and *Ardipithecus* at 4.4 MYA, the latter showing another peculiar mix of anatomical traits, defying the idea that there was a linear, ladder-like trajectory toward the evolution of *Homo*. Had there not been this 12.5–9-million-year gap in the African record, the African ape-like characteristics of the European genera might have been explained as an independent evolution, parallel but not ancestral to the African apes.

Begun’s book reminds us of the hugely impoverished world we live in

today, with no more than four types of apes other than ourselves left on earth. Here we must acknowledge that one of those apes—*Homo sapiens*—is indeed a rather special type. Begun notes how curious it is that gorillas and chimpanzees appear so similar to our early ancestors while humans are so radically different, despite all having had the same amount of time to evolve. Moreover, within the *Homo* genus, our species appears so radically different to all others, especially *Homo neanderthalensis* that became extinct a mere 30,000 years ago and had a brain size equivalent to our own.

This is, I suspect, because there was a unique evolutionary development a mere 100,000 years ago within a single lineage of apes somewhere in Africa: the evolution of language. This was not merely a more complex form of the vocal and gestural communication that all apes possess, one that reached its apogee with the Neanderthals. Language was the vehicle for a new type of thought that provided *Homo sapiens* with their competitive edge over all other species as they dispersed from Africa 70,000 years ago. The use of language created a new dynamic of culture change. In a tiny, very recent moment of evolutionary time, *Homo sapiens*, the only language-using ape, has created remarkable works of art and scientific achievement, while also contributing to the severe impoverishment of the natural world.

If only *Oreopithecus*—the last native ape in Europe—could have (literally) hung on for another six million years so we could have seen this wonderful creature that had evolved in a Tuscan swamp, becoming very large but with a small brain, a tree sloth-like ape. I also sensed from Begun’s book that paleoanthropology has itself become a little impoverished, and I worry for its future, just as I worry for the gorilla. Not because of the state of relevant science but because of the loss of a type of scientist, some of whom we glimpse in Begun’s account. These are the natural historians who had encyclopedic knowledge of the fossil record of their region and boundless generosity to younger researchers, the likes of Professor Miklós Kretzoi (1907–2005), the Hungarian paleontologist known affectionately to all as Uncle Miklós, and Professor Miquel Crusafonet-Pairó (1910–1983), the Catalan paleontologist always impeccably dressed as a gentleman.

One both hopes but also rather dreads that the ongoing molecular biology revolution will one day extract DNA from the fossils of *Aegyptopithecus* and *Dryopithecus* and from *Hispanopithecus* and *Ardipithecus*. That will subvert the need for the speculation and imagination required to interpret the meaning of tiny humps and bumps on fossilized teeth and bones for our evolutionary past. If such a scientific juggernaut does ever emerge in the Miocene world—and it may be a road too far—then I hope it verifies Begun’s thesis. For this is not just about a European origin for African apes, because the European apes themselves derived from Africa. Our human genome has been shaped by population dispersals back and forth between the continents, as has the whole history of human culture. That seems a good lesson to remember as hundreds of thousands flood into Europe today. □

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When Priests Marry

Garry Wills

**Keeping the Vow:
The Untold Story of
Married Catholic Priests**
by D. Paul Sullins.
Oxford University Press,
322 pp., \$29.99

Last year in a Pew poll, most American Catholics (72 percent) said they want their priests to be married. I don't know how many saying this realize that there are already married priests in the Roman Catholic Church. Probably not many—and this is no accident, as the priest-sociologist D. Paul Sullins writes in *Keeping the Vow*. The married priests are advised not to draw attention to themselves. Their most direct contact with the laity, as pastors of a parish, was for a long time forbidden. A concentration of more than two of them in one diocese was discouraged, so they were spread around to keep them exceptional, not the norm. Eastern Rite churches were forbidden until the time of Pope Francis to ordain married priests in the West.¹

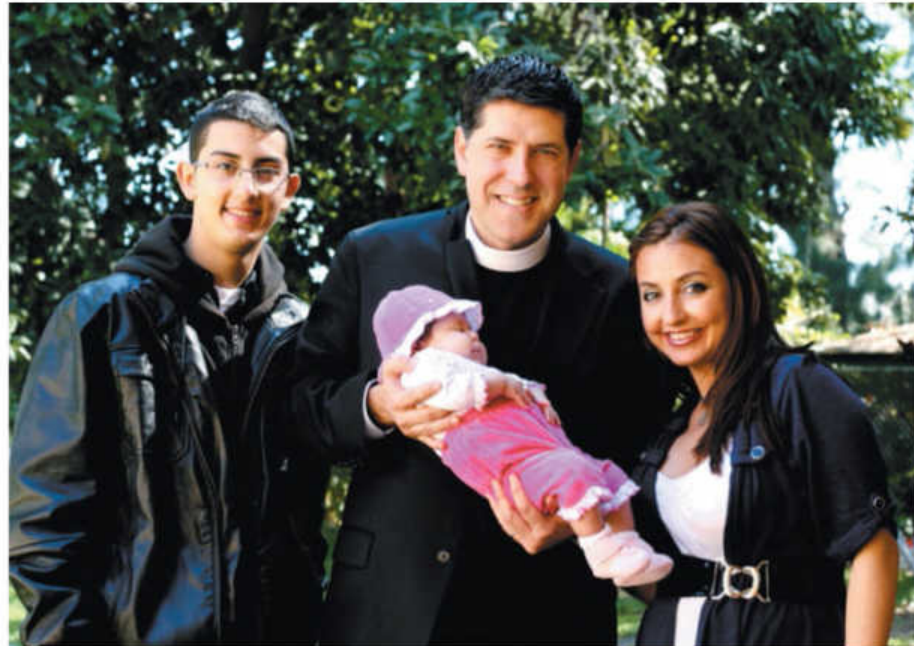
Roman Catholic married priests come in two sorts, one by long historical circumstance, the other by recent deliberate action. The former group, “Uniates,” is made up of priests from Eastern Rite churches that maintained union (hence their name) with the papacy. They were allowed to keep their wives, a normal practice in the Eastern church, in order to protect the papal tie. The second group, called “Pastoral Provision” priests, is made up of married Anglican priests who convert to Catholicism and are ordained again in the Roman church while keeping their wives. It is surprising, at first glance, that this privilege was granted by the very conservative Karol Wojtyła, Pope John Paul II, in 1980, and it was broadened by his equally conservative successor, Joseph Aloisius Ratzinger, Benedict XVI, in 2011 (for England) and 2012 (for the United States). This looks odd because any Catholic loosening of the celibacy requirement is supposed to come from the left.

It has sometimes been suggested by naïfs that this would help the ecumenical movement by bringing Anglicans and Catholics closer together. But that was far from the actual effect and papal intent. The aim was a divisive one, to widen a rift among Anglicans and solidify Catholic opposition to Anglicans. To see why this is so, consider both terms used of Anglican *conversion* to the Catholic Church.

Conversion

Truly ecumenical actions do not stress conversion. An example of this was the Second Vatican Council's confession of Catholic sins against the Jews. That was effected by a formidable number of Catholic priest-theologians from Jewish families. They pushed for passage

of the document *Nostra aetate*, which recognized the eternal validity of the Jewish covenant.² The official church no longer claimed that Christianity had superseded the Jewish religion. Some of the Catholic priests who worked for this long-overdue development did not refer to themselves as converts from Judaism. Like Saint Paul, they said they were still and always Jews. Paul VI, uncomfortable with the council bequeathed him by John XXIII, considered dissolving it rather than changing the condemnation of the Jews. (He



Father Alberto Cutié, who left the Catholic Church and married in 2009, with his wife, stepson, and infant daughter, Biscayne Park, Florida, 2011

also went against his own commission's findings rather than give up the condemnation of contraceptives.)

Contrast that reconciliation with Jews and the conversion demanded of married Anglican priests. In a three-step process, they must give up their heretical religion, request admission to the true faith, and then be ordained again, since popes had declared that Anglican sacraments are invalid. This does not bring Christians together, but declares more pointedly the incompatibility of Catholics and Protestants. It encourages schism in the Church of England, since the Anglicans seeking admission to the Catholic Church were opposed to the ordination of women in the 1970s and to the subsequent appointment of women and gays to be bishops. The distance between the two churches was further emphasized by the requirement that the converts not exercise their Catholic ministry in any place where they had served as Anglicans. This involved a break from old ties of locale, of friendships, and sometimes (for married couples with children) of schools.

Church

When it is said that Anglican priests have converted to the Catholic Church, one must ask which church they are entering. Since the 1960s, there have

been two churches, one of the Second Vatican Council and one of recent popes. The pivotal dates for this divergence are 1965, when the council's decrees were published, and 1968, when Giovanni Montini, Pope Paul VI, refused to accept his own commission's recommendation to drop the ban on contraception. The first date triggered a great flooding of priests from the church to get married (the very development most Catholics now favor), and the second began a great noncompliance with papal teaching in the laity.

On the first development, the exodus of priests had reached 70,000 by last year. And even the priests who stayed are more liberal than the incoming former Anglicans: asked in 2002 whether papal moral teaching is too conservative, a third of America's diocesan priests said that it is, while only 6 percent of the Anglican convert priests thought so. This is just one of many measures that put married priests at odds not only with other married Catholics but also with celibate priests. Asked if premarital sex is always sinful, a plurality of active (Mass-attending) lay Catholics (46 percent) said yes, a slight majority (53 percent) of diocesan priests said yes, but a supermajority (84 percent) of the convert priests said it is always sinful.

These new priests were twice as likely as diocesan priests to say condoms cannot be used to prevent AIDS (57 percent to 31 percent) or that it is always sinful to masturbate (64 percent to 30 percent). In fact, these new married priests thought other priests should remain celibate, though the unmarried priests thought marriage should be an option. Asked whether celibacy should be voluntary, not mandatory, a slight majority (52 percent) of supposedly celibate priests voted for the change, but only a third (34 percent) of the married priests agreed.

No wonder John Paul II was willing to recruit these priests who agreed with him for use against the many priests who did not obey him. And no wonder the convert priests have joined forces with one sector of the diocesan priests—those admitted after the 1980s. Though the number of men entering Catholic seminaries has de-

creased drastically, those who do ask for entry are naturally the ones willing to submit to all papal doctrine—placing them at odds not only with their fellow priests but with the laity they mean to serve. The older clergy and the laity are favorable to married priests, women priests, and contraception. The younger priests are not. They naturally seek admission to dioceses with conservative bishops. Since their seminaries have recruited more applicants than those with progressive bishops (though the scale is still small), conservatives boast that the way to increase “vocations” is to get stricter.

It is a system in which leaders are sought who will have little in common with their putative followers. This turns upside down the differences in attitude according to priests' age. In 1970, a survey made by the priest-sociologist Andrew Greeley and a colleague found that 82 percent of those under thirty-five favored optional celibacy. Now the younger priests are the ones most opposed to any change.

Another way that the younger priests differ from the older is in their attitude toward homosexuality. As one would expect from the older men's attitude toward celibacy, they are less condemning than the Vatican of gay behavior. Reputable studies estimate the number of gay priests as ranging from 15 to 50 percent, and a median estimate indicates that the percentage of gays in the priesthood is ten times that of gays in the general population. The Vatican says that the homosexual inclination, though it is morally disordered, is not a sin if one does not act on it. Anyone who thinks that this concentration of men with a gay inclination will not result in gay activity is as blind to reality as any pope. Years of study and counseling by the Catholic psychiatrist Richard Sipe led him to conclude that only 40 percent of priests, gay or straight, permanently practice celibacy.

The effect of mandatory celibacy may be less the abstention from sex than an obsession with it. The younger priests who accept the condemnation of homosexuality have been outspoken in denouncing their elders for fostering a gay subculture in some seminaries, making straight men uncomfortable there. Does the number of gay priests shock or disgust lay Catholics? Why should it, since another 2014 Pew poll shows that 85 percent of Catholics under thirty (and 70 percent of all Catholics) favor the moral acceptance of homosexuality, and 75 percent of the under-thirties (57 percent of all Catholics) favor gay marriage?

The numbers given above were polled or reported on by D. Paul Sullins, under a commission from Archbishop John Myers of Newark. Sullins is the head of a research team in the sociology department of the Catholic University of America, and he has published the findings of his study of Catholic priests, both married and unmarried, in *Keeping the Vow*. Himself a conservative convert from Anglicanism, his earlier research on the children of gay couples has been challenged, but his numbers about priests' beliefs (as op-

¹Pope Francis allowed married men from Eastern Rites to be ordained in the West on June 14, 2014. See Laura Ieraci, “Vatican Lifts Ban on Married Priests for Eastern Catholics in Diaspora,” *National Catholic Reporter*, November 17, 2014.

²See John Connolly, *From Enemy to Brother: The Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews, 1933–1965* (Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 180, and my review in these pages, March 21, 2013.

posed to the conclusions he draws from them) seem credible.³ We would have known, even if he does not spell it out, that Anglicans fleeing liberal changes in their previous church were bound to be traditionalists.

Sullins is naturally proud of his fellow converts' conservatism. He thinks this is a form of "fidelity" and observance that can stand as an example to priests who have succumbed to laxity. He and his companions are not hesitant about joining a church most of whose members disagree with them, since it is papal approval they are seeking. A number of them are previous converts from evangelical churches. They became Anglicans to find Authority. Not finding enough of it, they sought a Higher Authority and found it in Rome. These are just the men Popes John Paul and Benedict were hoping for. They were disappointed only that more did not come in. Whereas in 1981, John Paul kept the new priests from directly pastoral roles (a restriction largely skirted by traditionalist bishops who ordained the converts), Benedict created a new category, the "Ordinariate," so converts can be used as pastors by their own nonlocal ordinary (bishop).

If we know the kinds of priests John Paul wanted, we can guess the kind he did not. I discovered this in the early 1980s when I went on assignment to Rome for an article about him. I talked with the acting general of the world's Jesuits, Vincent O'Keefe, known to all as Vinnie. He was the acting general because the elected general, Pedro Arrupe, had suffered a stroke in 1981 and O'Keefe, as vicar general, was filling in for him. Father Arrupe, who was at Hiroshima when the bomb was dropped and ministered to the stricken there, was a liberal much loved by the Jesuits. When I asked Father O'Keefe for his assessment of the pope, he recounted his earliest meeting with him as the head of the Jesuits.

He told John Paul that he did not have anything like the pope's experience, knowledge, or insight, but one thing he knew from his own experience. As the head of an order whose members were leaving the priesthood in large numbers, he knew that most of these men were still believers in the church, men whose talent and training could be of use to the faith; but Paul VI, stunned by the defections, had tried to stanch the flow by cutting off the deserters from further contact with the church, denying them the Catholic sacraments. O'Keefe begged the pope to regularize ("laicize") such men's Catholic standing. The pope said no with a curt reply: "They broke their vow." End of discussion.

When, shortly after this, Arrupe formally resigned and the Jesuits were scheduled to convene and elect his successor, it was clear that O'Keefe, the man Arrupe had favored, and a man popular with other Jesuits, would be

elected. This was a prospect so unwelcome to the pope that for the first time in the history of the order he suspended the normal election process and appointed his own conservative Jesuit as an interim general—Paolo Dezza, who had taught John Paul at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. Some Jesuits feared that the pope suspected that Jesuits would disobey him, giving him a reason to suppress the order. But O'Keefe and others urged compliance with the pope, so the right to elect their own leader was restored in 1983.

John Paul was obviously unhappy with the Jesuits, and he showered fa-

titude toward the Anglican recruits, and he even tried to woo back the followers of Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, who protested the reforms of Vatican II by launching the schismatic Society of Saint Pius X (SSPX). Benedict lifted the excommunications of four SSPX bishops, including one (Richard Williamson) who is a Holocaust denier. The pope partially revived the trademark of the Lefebvrists, the Tridentine (Latin) Mass.

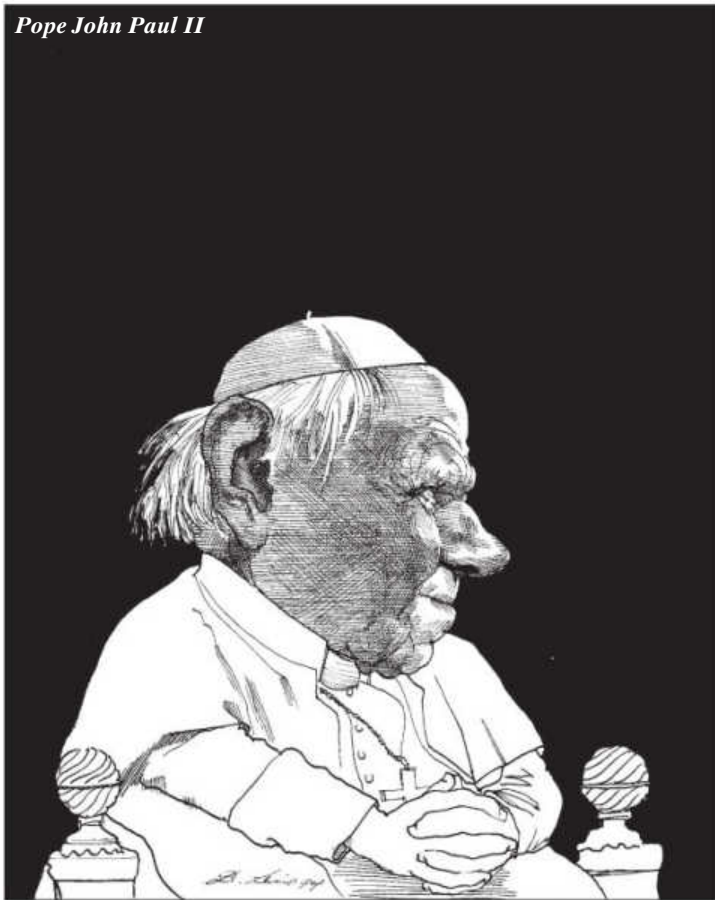
Over time, under the pressure of reality, the rules governing those who give up the priesthood have been relaxed, supported by the priests who did not leave. But a similarly tolerant attitude toward excommunicating people has been in evidence in the treatment of divorced and remarried Catholics, who are customarily denied the sacraments. This was a point of contention in the recent synod of bishops, and will come up again in this year's synod. The punitive use of sacraments is dear to the Anglican converts who have renounced their original church's sacraments to embrace those of their new church. They feel that the way to spread belief in Jesus is to bar the approaches to Him. That is why some bishops have tried to refuse communion to Catholic politicians who do not follow papal instruction on abortion.

These bishops remind me of the Pharisees, who said people should not meet with Jesus because he eats with sinners. When this was repeated to Jesus, he said, "The healthy do not need a doctor, only the sick do. I have not come to call the virtuous but to call sinners to a change of life [*eis metanoia*]." This was what Pope Francis was referring to when he wrote, in his first major statement, *The Joy of the Gospel*: "The Eucharist, though it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak."

The Catholic Church, whose charm was once its serenity of certitude, had latterly become a house of many fears. That is what happens to popes who lose touch not only with their people but with their priests. Panicking over this situation, they grasp at any support they can find. Paul VI, bewildered by the council that Pope John had bequeathed him, felt he would lose all his power if prior condemnation of the Jews and of contraception no longer prevailed. John Paul II, in many ways an athletic figure who radiated strength, was afraid of Vinnie O'Keefe, and so worried about his church's stability that he tried to prop it up with a rotten pillar like Marcial Maciel, and to bring in stealth squads of Anglicans fleeing from women wearing the chasuble. Benedict placed his hope in a rotten pillar like Lefebvre. Dealing with proof that bishops had protected child molesters, Benedict did not know what to do with the evidence. These were frightened men, moving in incense clouds of fear.

How it clears the air to have, at last, a pope who is unafraid. □

Pope John Paul II



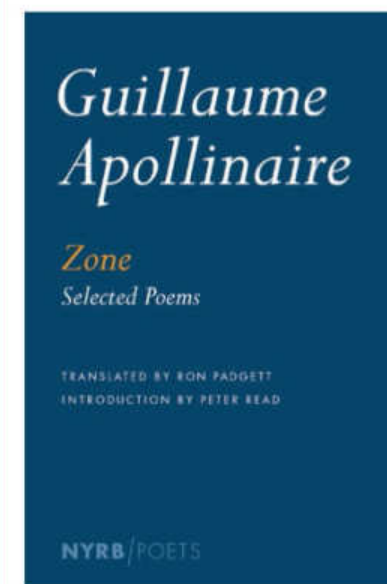
vors on newer and more conservative devotional bodies to displace their influence—Opus Dei, the Legionaries of Christ, Focolare, Communication and Liberation (supportive of Silvio Berlusconi). He was close to the child molester Marcial Maciel, who founded the Legion of Christ. It may be wondered why John Paul, who did not like Jesuits, raised the Argentine Jesuit Jorge Bergoglio—now Pope Francis—to be a bishop, then archbishop, then cardinal; but Bergoglio was at the time on the outs with his fellow Jesuits of Latin America, who thought he had opposed the liberation theology encouraged by Arrupe. This was all to the good in John Paul's eyes.⁴

John Paul's reining in of the Jesuits and promotion of traditionalists explain his strategy in the promotion of Anglican dissidents. He wanted what Father Sullins says the convert priests are supplying—a standing rebuke to other priests who are less doctrinally loyal. Pope Benedict followed this at-

⁴See Paul Vallely, *Pope Francis: Untying the Knots* (Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 55–61, 125; Elisabetta Piqué, *Pope Francis: Life and Revolution* (Loyola Press, 2014), pp. 92–93; and Austen Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope* (Henry Holt, 2014), pp. 166–167, 202–209. Before his election as pope, Bergoglio had arranged to retire to a non-Jesuit home and be buried in a non-Jesuit cemetery.

³On Sullins and gay parents, see Emma Green, "Using 'Pseudoscience' to Undermine Same-Sex Parents," *The Atlantic*, February 19, 2015.

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Medical Research: The Dangers to the Human Subjects

Marcia Angell

The Nuremberg Code

issued by the Nuremberg tribunal in 1947; available at www.hhs.gov/ohrp/archive/nurcode.html

The Declaration of Helsinki

issued by the World Medical Association in 1964 and revised most recently in 2013; available at www.wma.net/en/30publications/10policies/b3/

The Ethics Police?

The Struggle to Make Human Research Safe

by Robert L. Klitzman.
Oxford University Press,
422 pp., \$35.00

Every year millions of Americans (no one knows exactly how many) volunteer to be human subjects in medical research that compares a new treatment with an old one—or when there is no existing treatment, with a placebo. By something like a coin toss, some volunteers are assigned to get the new treatment (the experimental group), while others get the old one (the control group). This type of research is termed a clinical trial, and at any given time there are thousands underway in the US. Most are sponsored by makers of prescription drugs or medical devices, but many are sponsored by the government, mainly the National Institutes of Health (NIH). A growing number are conducted offshore, particularly in countries with autocratic governments, where they are easier and cheaper to do.

The first modern clinical trial was published only sixty-seven years ago, in 1948. Sponsored by the British Medical Research Council, the trial compared streptomycin, a new antibiotic, with bedrest alone in patients with tuberculosis. (Streptomycin proved better, and became part of the usual treatment for this disease.) Before that, human experimentation was fairly haphazard; subjects were treated in one way or another to see how they fared, but there was usually no comparison group. Even when there was, the comparison lacked the rigorous methods of modern clinical trials, which include randomization to make sure the two groups are similar in every way except the treatment under study. After the streptomycin study, carefully designed clinical trials soon became the scientific standard for studying nearly any new medical intervention in human subjects.¹

Patients with serious medical conditions are often eager to enroll in clinical trials in the mistaken belief that experimental treatments are likely to



Dr. Herta Oberheuser, whose war crimes included conducting medical experiments on concentration camp prisoners, being sentenced to twenty years in prison at the Nazi Doctors' Trial, Nuremberg, August 1947

be better than standard treatments (most turn out to be no better, and often worse).² Healthy volunteers, on the other hand, are motivated by some combination of the modest payments they receive and the altruistic desire to contribute to medical knowledge.

Given the American faith in medical advances (the NIH is largely exempt from the current disillusionment with government), it is easy to forget that clinical trials can be risky business. They raise formidable ethical problems since researchers are responsible both for protecting human subjects and for advancing the interests of science. It would be good if those dual responsibilities coincided, but often they don't. On the contrary, there is an inherent

tension between the search for scientific answers and concern for the rights and welfare of human subjects.

Consider a hypothetical example. Suppose researchers want to test a possible vaccine against HIV infection. Scientifically, the best way to do that would be to choose healthy participants for a trial, give the vaccine to half of them, and then inject all of them with HIV and compare the infection rates in the two groups. If there were significantly fewer HIV cases in the vaccinated group than in the unvaccinated group, that would prove that the vaccine worked. Such a trial would be simple, fast, and conclusive. In short order, we would have a clear answer to the question of whether the vaccine was effective—an answer that might have enormous public health importance and save many lives.

Yet everyone today would agree that such a trial would be unethical. If asked why, most people would probably say that people should not be treated like guinea pigs—that is, they should not be used merely as a means to an end. (And, of course, no fully informed person would volunteer for such a trial.) There is an instinctive revulsion against deliberately infecting

human subjects with a life-threatening disease, no matter how important the scientific question.

So in practice, the researchers in this hypothetical study would have to make scientific concessions for ethical reasons. Since they would be prohibited from injecting HIV, they would simply have to wait to see how many in each group (vaccinated and unvaccinated) got infected in the usual course of their lives. That could take many years and a very large number of subjects. Even if the researchers chose subjects at high risk of becoming infected with HIV—say, intravenous drug users—many people would have to be followed for a long time to accumulate the number of infections needed to permit a statistically valid comparison between the vaccinated and unvaccinated groups. Even then, the results might be hard to interpret, because of differences in exposures between the two groups. In short, doing an ethical trial would be far less efficient and conclusive—and much more expensive—than simply injecting the virus.

Conducting the trial ethically and more slowly might not just mean a loss of scientific efficiency. If the vaccine turned out to be effective, it could also mean a loss of lives—the lives of all those throughout the world who contracted HIV infection for want of a vaccine during the extra time it took to do an ethical trial. There would have been a trade-off between the welfare of participants in the trial and the welfare of the far larger number of people who would benefit from finding an effective vaccine quickly. Either human subjects would suffer by being deliberately exposed to HIV infection in an unethical trial, or future patients would suffer by having been deprived of a vaccine while an ethical trial was ongoing.

This hypothetical example of the tension between science and society, on the one hand, and ethics, on the other, is admittedly extreme. Nearly everyone would agree on the right course of action in this case; they would reject the utilitarian claim that injecting human subjects with HIV would do the greatest good for the greatest number. Yet there have been many real experiments over the years involving no less extreme choices in which researchers sacrificed the welfare of human subjects to the interests of science and future patients and believed they were right to do so.

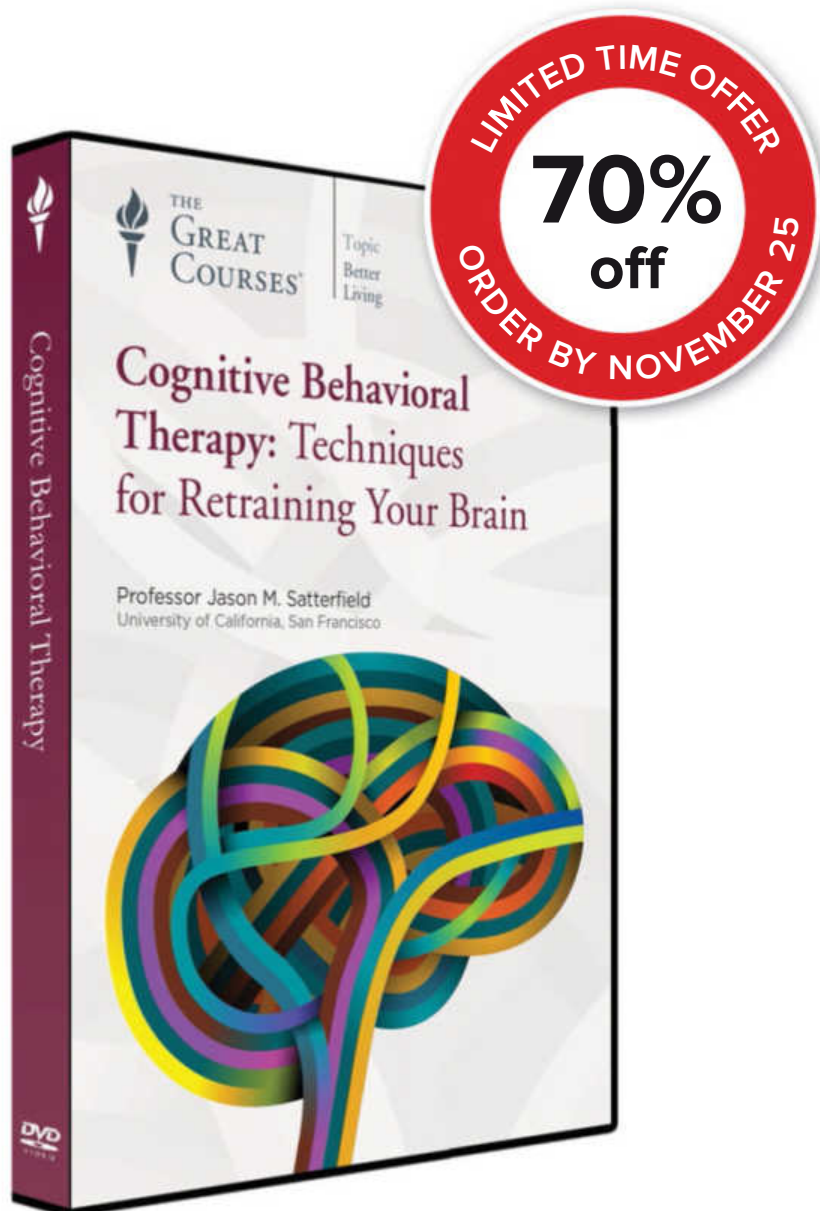
The most horrifying and grotesque of these were the medical experiments carried out by Nazi Germany during World War II on inmates in concentration camps.³ Although it is difficult to

¹The streptomycin results were published in the October 30, 1948, issue of the *British Medical Journal*, titled "Streptomycin Treatment of Pulmonary Tuberculosis: A Medical Research Council Investigation." For a later firsthand account of the trial and its implications, see John Crofton, "The MRC Randomized Trial of Streptomycin and Its Legacy: A View from

the Clinical Front Line," *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, Vol. 99, No. 10 (October 2006).

²Given the thousands of clinical trials conducted every year and the relatively small number of new treatments that become available, it would be impossible for it to be otherwise. In fact, according to FDAReview.org, only 8 percent of all drugs that enter clinical trials are eventually approved for sale by the FDA.

³See *The Nazi Doctors and the Nuremberg Code: Human Rights in Human Experimentation*, edited by George J. Annas and Michael A. Grodin (Oxford University Press, 1992). This is an excellent history and analysis, which includes the Nuremberg Code and the Declaration of Helsinki up through the 1975 revision.



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believe now, the people who designed these experiments—among them some of the most prominent physicians in Germany at the time—did have a purpose. They wanted to gain information that could save the lives of German troops in battle. In one experiment in Dachau, for example, their aim was to find the maximum altitude at which it would be safe for pilots to parachute from stricken planes. To that end, they put inmates in vacuum chambers that could duplicate progressively lower air pressure, up to the equivalent of an altitude of about 68,000 feet. About 40 percent of the victims died from lack of oxygen during these hideous experiments.

In another experiment, the researchers wanted to study how long pilots who had parachuted into the frigid North Sea could survive. They immersed victims in tanks of ice water for up to three hours, and many froze to death. The Nazis also tested a typhus vaccine by administering it to some, but not all, of a group of prisoners. They then infected them all with typhus to compare the death rate—an experiment identical in design to my hypothetical example.

At the end of the war, a series of war crimes trials were held by the victorious Allies in Nuremberg, Germany. One of them, presided over by American judges in a US military tribunal, was known as the Doctors' Trial. In that trial, which began in December 1946, the twenty-three surviving researchers (twenty of them physicians) responsible for the medical experiments in the concentration camps were accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity. In their defense, they presented a litany of excuses. Two of them are particularly important, because in modified form they have to this day been used repeatedly in defense of unethical research.

First, the Nazi doctors offered the utilitarian argument that their research would save more lives than it cost. They went on to say that this justification was all the more convincing, because the lives at stake were troops fighting for the very survival of their country. Extreme circumstances demand extreme action, they said. Second, the Nazi doctors pointed out that many of their human subjects were condemned to death anyway (for "crimes" such as being a Gypsy or a Jew). Those selected for medical experimentation might even have lived longer than they otherwise would.

The Nazi Doctors' Trial resulted in the conviction in August 1947 of sixteen of the twenty-three defendants, seven of whom were hanged and nine imprisoned. As part of the judgment, the court issued the celebrated Nuremberg Code in 1947—the first, shortest, and in many ways most uncompromising of the major ethical codes and regulations for the conduct of medical research on humans. Although the code had no legal authority in any country, it had great influence on ideas about human experimentation, and subsequent international codes and legislation.

The first provision of the Nuremberg Code is unqualified: "The voluntary consent of the human subject is absolutely essential." No exceptions are permitted. Given the Nazi experience, the reason for this is obvious. Experimentation on children and others not capable of deciding for themselves is

prohibited, since the code requires volunteers to have the "legal capacity" to consent. Furthermore, the code is clear that consent must be given by subjects who are fully informed. It states:

Before the acceptance of an affirmative decision by the experimental subject, there should be made known to him the nature, duration, and purpose of the experiment; the method and means by which it is to be conducted; all inconveniences and hazards reasonably to be expected; and the effects upon his health or person, which may possibly come from his participation in the experiment.



Children at St. Anne's residential school, northern Ontario, 1960s. In the 1940s, government researchers used Native Canadian students in some residential schools as subjects in nutritional experiments without their knowledge or consent, leaving many of them intentionally malnourished.

Other provisions are less absolute, and dependent on the judgment of researchers. One is the requirement that experiments should be "such as to yield fruitful results for the good of society" and "not random and unnecessary in nature"—that is, research should not be undertaken in the first place if it is not important. (Even with the most generous interpretation, that provision is now routinely violated, particularly by companies that sponsor research primarily to increase their sales.)

The code also stipulates that "the degree of risk to be taken should never exceed that determined by the humanitarian importance of the problem to be solved by the experiment," and that researchers should terminate experiments if they believe continuing them would be "likely to result in injury, disability, or death to the experimental subject[s]." According to the Nuremberg Code, then, informed consent is necessary, but not sufficient.

Was the issuance of the Nuremberg Code the end of unethical medical research? Not at all. In fact, over about thirty years, from 1944 to 1974, the US government conducted multiple experiments in which people were deliberately exposed to radiation without their knowledge or consent. The aim was to study the effects of testing nuclear weapons. To cite only two examples, the testicles of state prisoners in Oregon and Washington were irradiated to study the effects on sperm production, and terminally ill patients in a Cincinnati hospital underwent irradiation of their entire bodies to learn about its dangers

to military personnel. Note the irony that these experiments were taking place during the Nuremberg trials, and involved a similar justification—namely, that extreme circumstances, in this case the cold war, demand extreme actions.

From 1956 to 1972, a study was conducted at the Willowbrook State School for the Retarded in New York, in which the children there were deliberately infected with hepatitis to study the natural course of the disease and its treatment. The justification was that the sanitation in the facility was so poor that nearly all of these children would have contracted the illness anyway.⁴ Note the similarity to the Nazi doctors' excuse that many of the inmates in the

the NIH and FDA explicitly required that research they oversaw conformed with its principles. From the first, the Declaration of Helsinki weakened the Nuremberg Code's absolute requirement for informed consent by requiring consent only "if at all possible," and permitting research on children and others not capable of deciding for themselves, if parents or other legal proxies consented. Nevertheless, the first revision (1975) contained this unequivocal statement, "Concern for the interests of the subject must always prevail over the interest of science and society," and it also recommended oversight by independent committees.

But the Declaration of Helsinki foundered with the fifth revision in 2000 and its aftermath. The problem arose in the wake of heated debate about some clinical trials sponsored by the NIH and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in developing countries.

First some background: in a typical clinical trial, a new treatment is compared with an old one. In order to give "precedence to the well-being of human subjects," as required by the Declaration of Helsinki, researchers should have no reason to expect beforehand that the new treatment will be any better or worse than the old. They should be genuinely uncertain about that (ostensibly the reason for doing the trial in the first place). Otherwise, they would be guilty of deliberately giving an inferior treatment to some of the volunteers—something they must not do if the well-being of their subjects is given precedence. This state of uncertainty (sometimes referred to as "equipoise") is a generally accepted requirement for the ethical conduct of clinical trials. One of its implications is that researchers may not give placebos to subjects in control groups if there is known to be an effective treatment.

In 1994, research showed that administering an intensive regimen of zidovudine (also called AZT) could prevent pregnant women with HIV from transmitting the infection to their offspring; that regimen quickly became used throughout the US and other developed countries. But there was interest in knowing whether a less intensive (and cheaper) regimen of zidovudine would have the same effect, and some reason to believe it might. So the NIH and CDC sponsored a series of clinical trials in developing countries, mainly in sub-Saharan Africa, of a less intensive regimen. But instead of comparing it with the intensive regimen, these trials employed placebos in the control groups. The researchers could have provided the intensive regimen to the control groups, but they believed they would get faster results by using placebos. Yet they knew that by using placebos instead of a known effective treatment, roughly one in six newborns in the control groups would develop HIV infection that could easily have been prevented. (The rate of transmission in untreated women was already fairly well established.) Moreover, the research would have been prohibited in the United States and Europe.

When this became widely known in 1997 as a result of a publication in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, there was intense controversy, with many people (including me) critical of

concentration camps were condemned to death anyway.

Still, with the promulgation of the Nuremberg Code, there were now some broadly accepted principles, despite such egregious violations. Nevertheless, for all its strengths, it was felt that the Nuremberg Code needed change, mainly because the absolute requirement for informed consent by competent adults was widely seen as too stringent. There was also a need to address some of the special issues raised by the design of the new clinical trials introduced in the 1940s. How should risks and benefits to the experimental and control groups be balanced?

In 1964, the World Medical Association (WMA), which consists of a group of national medical societies, including the American Medical Association (AMA), issued the first Declaration of Helsinki. It has undergone seven revisions since then, most recently in 2013. Like the Nuremberg Code, the Declaration of Helsinki has no legal authority, but it rapidly became the new ethical standard by which clinical trials were judged, and for many years,

⁴In 1966, Henry Beecher, professor of research anesthesia at Harvard Medical School, published twenty-two examples of unethical human research. Example number sixteen was the Willowbrook study. Beecher's paper was widely reported, and contributed to the impetus for the 1974 National Research Act. See Henry K. Beecher, "Ethics and Clinical Research," *The New England Journal of Medicine*, Vol. 274, No. 24 (June 16, 1966). Additional footnotes appear in the Web version of this article at www.nybooks.com.

the trials, and others strongly defending them, including the directors of the NIH and CDC. The defenders of the research used versions of two now familiar arguments. First, they said the research stood to save more lives than it cost (the utilitarian argument used in nearly all questionable research) because using a placebo control would yield quicker results, and second, they said that the women in the control groups would not have received effective treatment outside the trials because it wasn't generally available in that part of the world, so they needn't

get it within the trials (a version of the "condemned anyway" argument).

In the wake of this controversy, some members of the WMA, most importantly the AMA, wanted the fifth revision of the Declaration of Helsinki to approve the use of placebos in clinical trials if the best current treatment was not generally available in the country where the trials were conducted. But others argued that researchers are responsible for all the human subjects they enroll, both the experimental and control groups, even if the best clinical care is not gener-

ally available in the particular country where the research is done. To the surprise of many, the latter view won the day, and the 2000 revision stated that no one should be given a placebo unless there is no known treatment—regardless of where the research is conducted.

The revision also raised the question of whether sponsors have continuing obligations to the subjects of their research in developing countries, such as providing them with any treatments found effective in trials in which they participated. But the debate did not

stop. Instead, two years later, under pressure from the AMA, footnotes were added to the relevant sections that modified them to the extent that the document became internally inconsistent. The NIH and the FDA no longer refer to the Declaration of Helsinki (the FDA instead refers to the International Conference on Harmonisation's less specific Good Clinical Practice guidelines), but it remains a touchstone in many other countries, despite its inconsistencies, and it is of great historical importance. □

—This is the first of two articles.

The Weird Art of the Ordinary

Leo Carey

All Days Are Night

by Peter Stamm, translated from the German by Michael Hofmann. Other Press, 185 pp., \$22.00

Two thirds of the way through the Swiss-German writer Peter Stamm's most recent novel, events appear to be moving toward an exciting climax. An artist has been commissioned to do a show at a small Alpine cultural center. He is determined not to repeat the work that made his name, a series of female nudes in domestic settings—"naked housewives," as his gallerist calls them. But he has no fresh ideas. Recently separated from his wife and weighed down by teaching commitments, he's badly blocked.

At the cultural center, he meets someone he once knew, a former presenter on a TV arts show, who was badly disfigured in a car crash six years earlier. (The novel as a whole is chiefly the story of her life after the accident.) Shortly before the accident, he had appeared on her show. They had an unconsummated flirtation, and he photographed her nude. Now, in the mountains, they become a couple and she shows him a folder that she keeps of images of her facial reconstruction surgery, leafing through it backward in time:

From page to page her face changed. It looked as though it was crumbling, even though it was always the same face. Sometimes Hubert clutched Jill's hand and asked her to go back one. Then there was a picture of Jill's nose, which looked like a large red potato, and another in which her whole face was cut and bloody. It was so swollen around the eyes that he could hardly see them, and everywhere there were patches of raw flesh. There was no nose.

That's what I looked like after the accident, said Jill. They took the photos in the hospital.

Hubert turned away. It wasn't the last picture, but Jill dwelled on it for a long time before turning the page. The next was a portrait of her as she was at the time Hubert had met her. Her face had an expression of vulnerability, as though she sensed what was in store for it.

Suddenly, Hubert recognizes the pre-accident images as the photo-



Peter Stamm with a bust of Gutenberg, Mainz, Germany, 2013

graphs he took of Jill in his studio. "Do you want me to exhibit these?" he asks. Clearly this extraordinary sequence of images should be the artist's salvation. They give him the chance to produce something that is both a continuation of his previous work and a comment on it. There's even a sense of art influencing life: Jill explains that if her husband, who died in the accident, hadn't happened to see the photographs, they wouldn't have quarreled, wouldn't have got drunk at a party, wouldn't have crashed their car.

But the moment passes. Hubert and Jill go to bed together. He makes a few sketches of her, but doesn't do anything with them. Not long after, the cultural center cancels his show and brings in another artist.

Having avoided one obvious climax, Stamm begins to set up another. Hubert has a brainwave for the show—an idea that he feels genuinely confident about. Once he discovers that his idea has come too late, and that another artist has been engaged, he is galvanized into a frenzy of competitive creativity. He loses himself in his work, barely stopping to eat or sleep, and the reader awaits a triumph over adversity in which art is redemption.

But no: Hubert suffers a breakdown and never finishes his work. Jill tends to him as he recuperates and even finds a job for him teaching art classes to Alpine tourists. Hubert is a big hit as a teacher and happier than he has been in a long time. Now we find ourselves in

a kind of reverse *Künstlerroman*—the story of an artist learning to step away from an intensity of aspiration that was making him miserable. Rather than striving to set himself apart from society with his art, he submits to a useful, undemanding life teaching landscape and life classes to tourists, and he seems much the better for it. Teaching amateurs rather than art students even refreshes his sense of art's value. "It's amazing how many people paint in their free time," he says with appreciation. Within just a few pages, however, this resolution, too, disintegrates and gives way to new events.

Stamm's novels have a way of confounding expectations, of slipping sideways, dissolving and refocusing. His characters run away from home only to change their minds, sabotage relationships just when they seem to be flourishing, embark on journeys of discovery that turn out to lead nowhere in particular. They often seem to be fleeing something but rarely know what that something is. They throw away keepsakes, fail to answer phones, and delete e-mails and text messages without reading them.

Stamm has emerged in the past decade as an important voice in European fiction—he was shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize in 2013—and has become known for a stripped-down, objective style. Like his characters, Stamm travels light:

language, description, and gesture are pared to the minimum, and the books are short. Much of the fiction writer's traditional armory—set pieces, epiphanies, tragic events—seems to hold no interest for him. As one reads, it is often hard to say exactly what makes the novels so engrossing. They proceed in an almost improvisatory way (in interviews Stamm has said that he writes his first draft on instinct, then revises), but the overall impression is of a quiet fixity of purpose.

Stamm was born in 1963, in a town near Lake Constance. (Skinny-dipping in lakes features often in his work, almost always used to evoke carefree youth and incipient sexuality.) As a young man, he worked at a variety of jobs, including as an accountant and in a psychiatric clinic. He spent time in New York, Paris, London, and Scandinavia, and his earliest fiction—such as the stories collected in the volume *In Strange Gardens*—seems to draw on these experiences. The more lasting legacy of these years is his characters' rootlessness, as well as a quietly international outlook. His protagonists are often Swiss-Germans living abroad—in Paris, say, or Queens. Stamm evokes locations with precision but without atmospherics, as if Swiss neutrality had enabled him to write with matter-of-fact at-homeness more or less anywhere.

In the 1990s, Stamm produced journalism and radio plays, before publishing his first novel, *Agnes*, in 1998. Currently out of print in English, it is hugely popular in German and features on school curriculums. It is easy to see why: the book is simple and haunting, a kind of parable without a message. It is unlike Stamm's later work in the overt way that it establishes suspense and a self-referential tone. "Agnes is dead," it begins. "Killed by a story. All that's left of her now is this story." The plot follows a Swiss-German writer living in Chicago who starts an affair with a young woman he meets at a library. To amuse her, he starts writing the story of their relationship, first narrating things as they have happened, then writing future occurrences for her to comply with—wearing a particular dress, moving in with him. His story often improves on reality; the fictional reaction to the young woman's pregnancy is in notable contrast to his piggish response in real life. But as the book progresses,

the story begins to express a darker side to the relationship.

Stamm rarely deploys self-referential gestures now, but other features of *Agnes* have become cornerstones of his method. He is adept at creating a sense of reality by leaving things out. Early on, the couple visits a restaurant and sees a dead woman on the sidewalk outside. Later, the narrator mentions that they went to her funeral and “learned her story” but the reader never hears what happened. In a similar way, an early story casually establishes a sense of veracity by telling us, “There had been an accident somewhere, a fire, I don’t remember what. At any rate, the train came from Geneva half an hour late.”

Stamm makes ingenious use of blandness. “It generally is cold in this city,” the narrator tells us on the first page of *Agnes*—surely the least interesting sentence it is possible to write about Chicago. (Michael Hofmann’s excellent translations effortlessly capture the controlled flatness of this style.) In Stamm’s hands, banality becomes a crucial technique for establishing character. After the narrator and Agnes first sleep together, he says, “In a way, we do carry on living after we’re dead. In the memories of other people.” The thought is pure cliché, but that’s the point. This is just pillow talk, after all, and it’s a thought that almost everyone has had at some point. Stamm almost never makes his characters sound cleverer than they probably would be in real life, but neither is there a hint of condescension or faux naïveté. Instead, by resisting the temptation

to be interesting in the short term, he manages to convince us of the reality of the characters and relationships we encounter.

Something similar applies to Stamm’s descriptions, which can be economical to the point of parsimony. Early in the new novel, Jill returns from hospital, still horribly disfigured, and lies on the floor of her apartment:

She asked herself who had bought these books, hung up these pictures. A silkscreen print by Andy Warhol, Marilyn, the same face ten times over, lifeless as an advertising poster. The minimalist furniture, the soulless accessories, carefully chosen from expensive design shops, souvenirs though they were connected to no particular memories. She rolled onto her back and looked up at the Italian designer lamp that seemed to hang just above her.

From a different kind of writer this would seem superficial, even lazy. Surely the overall impression—of sterile luxury—should be particularized more and suggested more subtly. Most novelists showing us the protagonist’s home for the first time would take the opportunity for lavish description. Stamm rarely even tries to do this, and for his particular fictional world it is the right choice. His characters are usually not connoisseurs, and, like most of us, they take the basic tone of their surroundings at a glance. The flatness of description entails its own kind of realism. Although Jill and her dead husband chose the furniture “carefully,” whether they ended up

buying Eames chairs or Marcel Breuer chairs doesn’t really matter.

There is a critique here (which Stamm is careful not to express more emphatically than Jill would): the essence of a luxury is to be expensive—what it actually looks like is secondary. At this point in the novel, Jill is coming to see her former life, as an affluent, attractive media personality, as “one long performance”: “It must have been a lie if it was so easy to destroy with a moment’s inattention.” The sense that successful lives entail inauthenticity is recurrent in Stamm’s work.

There are risks to Stamm’s method. One involves a tension between credible motivation and larger implications. In his second novel, *Unformed Landscape*, a woman from Arctic Norway is stricken with disorienting dread:

Kathrine was confused, and her confusion frightened her. It was as though she had lost all her orientation, as though she had stepped out of her life like a house, a house she was viewing now from the outside, from below, from a foot above the ground, from the point of view of a dog, or a child.

Leaving her young son behind, Kathrine leaves her hometown, wanders as far afield as France, and returns. The sheer haphazardness of her itinerary is beautifully controlled: because we don’t quite understand what she’s seeking, we stay interested.

By the time she returns, however, it has become clearer that the recent breakdown of a marriage, her second, is what has precipitated her crisis. For Kathrine this is a gain in self-knowledge—“I’m not going to run away a second time,” she decides—but for the reader there is a slight disappointment. It’s as if one were to discover, at the end of *L’Étranger*, that Meursault’s crime really had its roots in genuine distress at the loss of his mother. For as long as her problems were inchoate, the journey seemed like a pure quest. Once they are more cogently articulated, it’s easier to see her as simply a neglected wife acting out. The ordinariness of Kathrine’s experience is clearly important to Stamm, but his novels are at their most effective when characters hover at a slight remove from psychological motivation. Nameless dread is more interesting than dread with a name.

The other great risk is that, in being so patiently attentive to the momentary vacillations of his characters’ impulses, Stamm denies himself many of the effects that novels do well. It’s telling that his most powerful work to date remains his previous novel *Seven Years*, which comes to a climax in a way that the other books do not. A spectacular tale of erotic obsession, it follows a German architect, Alex, whose outwardly perfect life—he and his beautiful, talented wife Sonia run a firm in Munich—is offset by his fixation with an unattractive, unsophisticated Polish illegal immigrant.

The deliberately provocative premise is drummed home with calm brutality. Of his mistress, Alex says “Her ugliness and pokiness were a provocation to me”; of his perfect but unemotional wife, “She was like one of those dolls whose clothes are sewn onto their

bodies.” Propulsive and convincing, the novel makes full use of standard novelistic techniques. The profession of architecture assumes thematic importance (Alex’s wife even makes an architectural model of their future life together) and elements of the plot come close to melodrama—an inconvenient pregnancy, a business reversal, a terrifying descent into alcoholism.

By contrast, *All Days Are Night* marks a return to the more meandering style of *Unformed Landscape* and *On a Day Like This* (in which a man who fears a cancer diagnosis sells his apartment, leaves his job, and severs personal ties before embarking on an erratic European road trip). But although it is a quieter book than *Seven Years* it shares many of the same preoccupations. Jill, like Alex, feels the shallowness of a seemingly perfect, enviable life. Attractiveness, again, seems untrustworthy: Jill appears to be a better, happier person once she is disfigured. (Her surgery is a success but some scars remain.) The handling of this theme is subtler than in *Seven Years*, and certainly Jill gets a fairer hearing than unapproachably perfect Sonia did. She is capable of recognizing her own superficiality and becomes for a while deeply curious about what faces reveal and what they hide—for instance, rewatching her interview with Hubert frame by frame to catch momentary ambiguities of expression.

This is also the first novel of Stamm’s to enter the point of view of more than one character. We start with Jill just after the accident recalling her life before it; jump to Hubert’s narration six years later; then end with Jill’s perspective again. This gives the novel a more forgiving tone than its predecessors. We see two sets of meandering impulses, and the characters get a more nuanced treatment than they might have otherwise. Hubert being interviewed by Jill seems sure of himself, even arrogant. Once we’re inside his perspective, we see how much his brooding persona reflects real doubts about his career as an artist.

In recent years, many novelists have declared themselves bored with the conventions of fiction, with what the critic James Wood has called “cumber-some caravans of plot and scene and ‘conflict.’” The trend has produced some strong work, but can lead to conventionalities of its own. Stamm’s work, in its unassuming way, points to a different way of resolving these discontents, showing, as Wagner once said of Brahms, “what can still be done in the old forms when someone comes along who understands how to use them.”

Stamm proceeds from the central, unopposable truth that life, no matter how urgent our experience of it, is inevitably a procession of clichés—of breakups, attractions, family tensions, professional impasses, midlife crises, occasional unforeseeable cataclysms. The surprising, almost directionless twists of plot come from a patient accretion of ordinariness. Stamm works to combine obvious elements in quietly surprising ways, showing that clichéd events need not produce clichéd outcomes. His ability to balance the reader’s desire for some sort of resolution with our experience of life, in which resolutions are interim at best, explains the power of his output. Its lack of emphasis is its strength. □

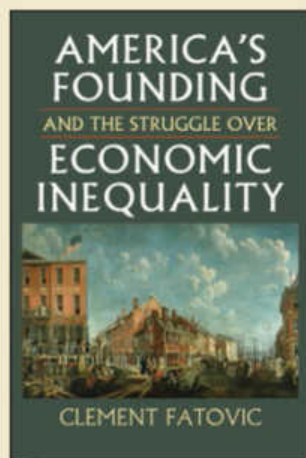
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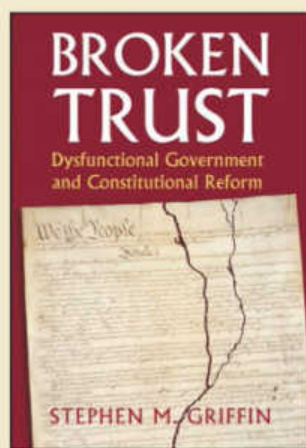
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The Joys of Innovation: For Profit Only

Benjamin M. Friedman

**Mass Flourishing:
How Grassroots Innovation Created
Jobs, Challenge, and Change**
by Edmund Phelps.
Princeton University Press,
378 pp., \$29.95

In his inaugural address on March 4, 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt sought to reassure his fellow citizens that he would devote full effort to putting them back to work and lifting them out of the widespread poverty and destitution into which the Depression of the past three years had sunk so many. But the new president also struck a different tone, departing from the stricken nation's natural focus on restoring employment and material living standards. "Happiness lies not in the mere possession of money," Roosevelt declared; "it lies in the joy of achievement, in the thrill of creative effort. The joy and moral stimulation of work no longer must be forgotten in the mad chase of evanescent profits."

In highlighting the importance of creativity and achievement, and therefore the *moral* value of work, Roosevelt—the US president who, more than any other, quoted from the Bible and appealed to biblical themes—was harking back to a traditional religious interpretation of humanity.¹ In the account given in Genesis, God created man "in our image, after our likeness." But what image was that? As of the sixth day of creation, when the story has God making Adam and then Eve, all that God had done was *create*: first the light and the darkness, then the sky and the earth and the oceans, then plants, then the sun and moon and stars, then birds and fish, and finally—until man, that is—land animals. The essential trait to be imparted when God created man "in his own image," therefore, was creativity. Although the creation story as we have it is from the Hebrew Bible, the identification of creativity as the intrinsic essence of the human character, on just these grounds, is familiar among Christian thinkers as well.²

Secular thinkers have often expressed the same idea. David Hume, the quintessential Enlightenment philosopher, departed from the traditional Western view, dating to Aristotle, that the distinguishing characteristic of man is reason. Hume argued that it is the human imagination. His protégé Adam Smith followed his lead in this respect. The main theme of Smith's first book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, was

the paramount role in human relations of what he called "sympathy"; but sympathy of the kind he envisioned—a "fellow-feeling" that requires "placing ourselves in [another person's] situation"—is possible "by the imagination only."

Not surprisingly, Smith also wrote about the importance of imagination in his economic analysis. He did not have in mind the modern idea that creative people continuously devise inventions

has been a continual theme. But starting in around the 1830s, it became obvious that creativity and innovation had practical value as well. By the end of the nineteenth century, especially in the United States, technological progress—the steam engine, railroads and fast ships, electricity and its myriad uses, the telegraph and telephone—were adding as much to the economy's productive powers as the increased specialization of tasks associated with new



Edmund Phelps, Amartya Sen, and Joseph Stiglitz at a conference
on the future of capitalism, Paris, January 2009

that enhance productivity and therefore enable ongoing economic growth of the kind the West has enjoyed for the past two centuries; he lived too early to understand this process, nor did he envision it. Instead, as he highlighted at the beginning of his second book, *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith thought improvements in productivity, and therefore in living standards as well, came from increasing specialization and routinization of the tasks individual workers performed—what he called the "division of labor."

But Smith also understood that the narrower and more repetitive a worker's job became, the more constricted were the possibilities presented to the human being inside:

The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations... has no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention, in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become.

The corrective Smith recommended for the "torpor of [the] mind" to which ever-increasing division of labor would lead was state-sponsored mass education.

In the two-plus centuries since Smith wrote, the tension between the social aspiration for intellectually and morally stimulating work and the basic need to get the economy's work done

methods of mass production. By the end of the twentieth century, throughout the Western world, the drive to generate ever more output from the limited human and other resources available had become largely a matter of pushing out the technological frontier.

Edmund Phelps, a Columbia economics professor who won (and richly deserved) the Nobel Prize in 2006, has thought through this challenging intersection of economics and philosophy. Phelps's subject, in his wide-ranging book *Mass Flourishing*, is what he calls "modern capitalism."³ In his interpretation the crucial feature of this way of carrying out economic activity is not just private ownership of the plant and machinery used for production—he takes this for granted—but the centrality of creativity and innovation, and the resulting dynamism of what a modern capitalist economy produces and how it goes about it. Importantly, therefore, an economy can have private ownership of the means of production and, if it fails to foster creativity and innovation, still fail to qualify as "modern capitalism." Indeed, that is Phelps's diagnosis of the Western economies today. Moreover, "the economic growth rate of a country is *not* a useful measure of dynamism." Even apart from what remains of its once-pervasive socialist ownership, China is not a modern capitalist economy either.

³See also his summary in "What Is Wrong with the West's Economies?," *The New York Review*, August 13, 2015.

In the spirit of FDR, as well as of Hume and Smith along with the more recent thinkers on whom he draws (he especially favors the philosophers John Rawls and Thomas Nagel and the economist/philosopher Amartya Sen), Phelps values creativity and innovation not just on the grounds of productivity but because of their value to human well-being more broadly. "For an ever-increasing number of people in the modern economies," he writes, "continued growth of their wage rates and salaries is not among the most important things in their lives." What then do people value? For Phelps, the essence of human nature is "a desire to express creativity, a relish for challenge, an enjoyment of problem solving, a delight in novelty, and the restless need to explore and to tinker." Taking a phrase from Aristotle, this is what he calls "the good life." It is what he means by "flourishing."

And this is precisely why Phelps thinks modern capitalism matters. From its beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century, he argues, the modern capitalist economy "altered human experience by enlisting creativity, inviting experimentation, and fostering innovation," and on this account it "earned its place as a watershed development in world history." "A modern economy turns people who are close to the *economy*, where they are apt to be struck by new commercial ideas, into the investigators and experimenters who manage the innovation process.... It turns all sorts of people into 'idea-men.'" In short, the modern capitalist economy is "a vast *imaginarium*." And because our use of the imagination is central to what "the good life" is all about, "a modern economy, when functioning well and justly, is tailor-made to produce the flourishing and personal growth that are at the core of the good life."

Moreover, again in the spirit of FDR and now of Smith as well, Phelps's concern for this kind of "flourishing"—and therefore his enthusiastic endorsement of modern capitalism—is deeply democratic. In a modern capitalist economy, he argues, everyday work for ordinary citizens provides "the experience of engagement, personal growth, and fulfillment." It does so because of "the endless succession of new problems" that "keep their work challenging"—and not just for some elite: "In an economy of dynamism, some portion of *most participants*' time is spent looking at current practice with the expectation that a new idea will occur for a better way to do things or a better thing to produce" (my italics). "Every company or participant is like a forward observer, or scout ant," he writes. "In the modern economy, careers almost force participants on a winding voyage of *exploration*." Indeed, "a modern-capitalist economy is outstanding in the prospects it offers *ordinary people* for the good life" (my italics). Phelps admires modern capitalism because it provides not just flourishing but *mass* flourishing.

But Phelps's book, while a paean to the possibilities of capitalism, is far

¹See, for example, James MacGregor Burns, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (Harcourt Brace, 1956), p. 476, and Ronald Isetti, "The Moneychangers of the Temple: FDR, American Civil Religion, and the New Deal," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Summer 1996), p. 678.

²A recent example from an economic perspective is Edd Noell and Stephen L. S. Smith, "Economic Growth: Reassessing the View from Christian Theology and Morality," ASREC Conference, March 2015.

from optimistic. The Western economies, he claims, including that of the United States, have lost their dynamism and hence no longer meet the conditions of modern capitalism as he defines it. In America the dynamism essential to modern capitalism ended approximately in the 1970s. In Europe and Japan, which never had much creative capacity to begin with but rather relied on innovations pioneered and developed in the US, the end of dynamism in America meant the end there too. The result is the pervasive slowing of economic growth that has attracted so much attention in recent decades, and still does. Here too, however, Phelps's focus is on the nonmaterial dimension of life. Today, he laments, "There is no longer in America or in Europe [even] a sense of what mass flourishing was like." "The rich experience of working and living in such an economy" is gone.

Phelps's explanation in part agrees with the standard literature seeking to explain the slowing of American and European economic growth, but the emphasis is different and so too is his interpretation. Many of the now familiar elements of this story are present in his account: bloated corporate bureaucracy and the ever-increasing focus on the next quarter's earnings; the progressive shift of stock ownership to mutual funds, which rarely challenge managements on matters of long-term business strategy; a mania for speculation and mergers on the part of banks newly empowered by the collapse and then formal repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act that once separated banking from the investment business ("the banking industry betrayed the very concept of a modern economy"); the fixation of America's economic elites on making money for its own sake ("wealth seeking competes with innovation seeking"); the parallel rise of "a culture of self importance or entitlement"; ever greater polarization of America's politics; and the expansion of the social welfare state.

But Phelps's main concern goes beyond this standard dirty-laundry list. He thinks America has succumbed to a "new corporatism" in which large, established business firms enlist the government's help to block economic innovation in order to preserve their existing position and advantage. This new "corporatist complex between the government and the private sector" stifles competition through a combination of subsidies to the already-dominant firms and impediments to aspiring competitors. Specific forms of this new corporatism include excessively protective patent laws and a variety of regulations that enable those who got there first to shut out new innovators, together with subsidies of all kinds, including farm subsidies and the subsidies to finance that had an ultimately disastrous part in leading to the housing and mortgage debacle of the last decade. Phelps also refers to a "congressional-banking complex" in which "banks and political interests have entered into new arrangements for their mutual benefit":

The explosion of corporate welfare, self-serving regulations and deregulations, and a sea of social insurance have all depended on a willingness or eagerness on the part of government officials and

legislators to protect vested interest and to cater to special interests in return for electoral support and financial support. It is a *system* of interlocking parts.

The end result is that "the economic performance of the economies that had so recently been exemplars of modern capitalism has recently been disastrous." In America, "The economy seems to be moving to a frozen state."

But Phelps makes it clear that economic policies, like other social institutions, do not simply materialize on their own. They represent the "values," collectively the "culture," of the society itself, and here is his most fundamental concern. Phelps believes that the "modern values" that gave rise to modern capitalism—"thinking and working for yourself," "readiness to accept change caused or desired by others," "the desire to test one's self against others," "the willingness to take the initiative," "the welcoming of hurdles to surmount," "the desire to be intellectually engaged"—are in retreat. Moreover, in what will be a surprise to many politically and socially conservative readers, who up to this point will have nodded in agreement all through the argument, what these modern values are so disastrously retreating in the face of is "a resurgence of traditional values" and "a new attention to family values."

What, then, is to be done? Phelps's goal is clear: "enlisting the imagination and energy of participants [in the economy] from the grassroots on up... engag[ing] the mind and seiz[ing] the imagination of participants down to draftsmen, day laborers, farmers, traders, and factory workers." The democratic spirit, the value placed on inclusion, the concern for everyday Americans who make up the bulk of the country's workforce, are a large part of what makes his argument appealing.

To achieve these ends, Phelps would recruit more people to government who have had practical experience innovating in business. He would shrink corporate welfare and repeal anticompetitive regulation. He would "stop the corporate practice of paying CEOs very high salaries over a term expected to be very short," and ban "golden parachute payments." He would reform mutual funds. He would revive "old-fashioned...relational banking" and "restructur[e] the banking behemoths of the present day into smaller units with much less latitude." Above all, he would "strengthen the modern values" that used to lie behind America's modern capitalist economy, in the first instance by "reintroducing" into secondary and higher education concepts like individualism, which he sees as having been replaced by assignments "aimed more at communicating feeling and compassion."

What is not on Phelps's list is noteworthy too. He of course believes in both personal and economic freedom. But "America is unlikely to recover the dynamism and resulting prosperity it had up to the 1970s as long as it operates on the belief that freedom is sufficient to do so, and that freedom can always be dialed up by a downward adjustment of tax rates." Further, "Not all freedoms are good for dynamism."

All of these proposed changes are worthwhile, at least at the level of abstraction at which Phelps, in this book writing as much as a philosopher as an economist, offers them. (In matters like reforming corporations and mutual funds and banks, the debate is usually over the more specific substance, even the details; in arguments over school curriculum it is even more so.) If his book were simply about economic growth, these steps would be plausible entries on the policy agenda of anyone without a vested interest in the status quo (such as the bankers and corporate CEOs he so harshly criticizes).

Phelps's objective, however, is not economic growth per se but *mass flour-*



Mabel Poulton in the 1931 film *Number, Please*

ishing—that is, delivering the good life, centered on the exercise of creativity and intellectual stimulation, to the broadest possible swath of the working population. And there his program is open to question.

To begin at the beginning, saying what constitutes "the good life," not just for oneself but for men and women generally, is inherently problematic. In response to the emergence of sustained rapid productivity growth in the early nineteenth century, the future-oriented utopian socialists who proliferated at midcentury mostly supposed that people would devote their freed-up time to activities like gathering to read plays. Among the pursuits that real people turned out to prefer instead, as the work week continued to shrink, the utopians forgot about gambling and engaging in sports, and they never imagined the opportunities modern telecommunications would open up for watching other people engage in sports. Phelps may be right that what most people want in life, and find satisfying when they find it, is the challenge of creativity at work. But this is mostly a philosophical assumption.

The greater problem is Phelps's further assumption that with the changes he advocates—indeed, under any plausible set of conditions at all—the broadly democratic, inclusive character he envisions for economic creativity can be a reality. The point of his argument for what he calls "modern capitalism" is not the importance of creativity and innovation in improving the material living standards that the majority of citizens enjoy as consumers; rather he emphasizes the moral value of creativity and innovation in what the majority of citizens do as workers.

As a historical matter, it is not obvious, and Phelps provides little evidence, that the American economy ever provided such opportunities on the broad basis he envisions, even during the

century-plus before the 1970s that he hails as its great era of modern capitalist success. To be sure, many people during that era did face challenges, and solve problems, and devise new methods, and even invent new products in the course of their everyday work; and many of those started out as ordinary workers. Carnegie and Edison and the Wright brothers and Alexander Graham Bell are all part of American history and legend. But the percentage of 1880s steel mill workers, or 1920s shop clerks, or 1950s waitresses and automobile salesmen who fulfilled this aspiration (assuming it was what they aspired to) is not known. Nor is it obvious that the percentage then was actually greater than it is today.

One clue to Phelps's reason for thinking that the economy did once provide such broad opportunities lies in his discussion of the kinds of work that do or do not provide the opportunity for creativity. In contrast to work of the modern capitalist kind, which he takes to provide ample opportunity for creativity and innovation, he also considers "priests, ministers, rabbis," "caregivers in a nursing home or a hospice," "positions in nonprofit organizations aimed at a cause, such as the environment," and other "work in an organization where the individual's own benefit is not the objective"—in short, anything not in the economy's for-profit sector. "In these lines of work," he states, "there is relatively little prospect, if any, of experiencing exploration or creation." Creativity is limited to the for-profit sector.

This claim—not that such jobs add less economic value than those in the for-profit sector (which may or may not be true), but that they are devoid of opportunities for creativity and problem-solving—is astonishing. Is it true that nurses face fewer on-the-job challenges requiring solutions than do waitresses and secretaries and call-center operators? Or that someone devising legislative strategies at the Sierra Club has less opportunity for creativity than an opponent on the lobbying staff of Peabody Coal? What of the foundation-funded research scientist looking for a way to produce energy with less pollution? What about teachers? Would it matter whether the school is a public school or private? Or if it's private, whether it's for profit or not? (Phelps teaches at Columbia and I'm at Harvard. Would we have more opportunity for creativity at the for-profit University of Phoenix?)

If the question at issue were whether those who work in organizations not driven by the profit motive have less chance of being an innovator like Bill Gates or Steve Jobs or Sergey Brin, Phelps's bias would perhaps be more understandable. But that is not the question he's asking. His argument is about the *mass* of workers, not the elite. It may be true that intellectual challenge and the opportunity for creativity are, or could be, part of the everyday working life of ordinary people working in business firms in ways that they are not, and cannot be, for those working in government or private not-for-profit organizations. But establishing that proposition would require both argument and evidence that Phelps does not provide. It is certainly not obvious on its face.

A parallel concern surrounds Phelps's policy recommendations. Restructuring America's banks, reforming executive pay and other elements of corporate governance, and improving the curriculum of US education (whether in Phelps's suggested direction or not) should be on every American's action list for the coming decade. Doing so would surely contribute—no one knows by how much—to the economy's ability to grow and to improve citizens' living standards. But whether these steps would create (or as Phelps believes, recreate) an economy in which intellectual challenge and the opportunity for creativity and innovation are pervasive throughout the work force is dubious.

In *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, published in 1976, the great American sociologist Daniel Bell predicted that capitalism would undermine itself, not by failing but by succeeding. Writing just at the time when Phelps argues that the American economy began to lose its "dynamism," Bell followed Max Weber in believing that an identifiable set of cultural values underlay capitalism's early development and subsequent success. But, he argued, over time the rising incomes and improving living standards that this novel way of organizing economic activity delivered would inevitably change the objective circumstances on which those values in turn depended. As the society grew richer, the importance attached to further gains in material living standards would diminish while other, nonmaterial aspirations would assume ever greater priority. As a result, willingness to sacrifice the latter for the former would erode, and, in time, so too would capitalism.

The phenomenon lamented in Phelps's *Mass Flourishing*, nearly forty years later, is a realization of what Bell envisioned. Looking backward, Phelps sees "modern capitalism" as having eroded since the 1970s. And as Bell anticipated, he attributes this deterioration to a weakening of the values on which modern capitalism depended. Unlike Bell, Phelps takes the society's

values—its "economic culture"—as the starting point of the causal chain. If Bell was right, however, these changing values are themselves the result of capitalism's success up to the time (the 1970s) when Phelps sees its deterioration as having set in. The interaction between the society's values and its economy has followed its own internal dynamic.

Because he mourns the passing of "modern capitalism" not for its material benefits but rather for the moral value of creative and innovative work it provided, Phelps gives a rationale for seeking to reverse this dynamic.⁴ Further, he sees the problem as due not just to changing economic values, as living standards have risen, but to the perverse ability of large business firms and other interests to protect their existing economic advantage by capturing government. His argument therefore presents the possibility of both philosophical and practical routes to reversing the dynamic that Bell predicted.

If Phelps is right that people value the opportunities for creativity and innovation that a healthy "modern capitalist" economy offers, and right, too, that modern capitalism provides these opportunities on the widespread, inclusive basis that he claims, making all this known may alert citizens to what they have sacrificed. And if he is right that the "new corporatism" is the mechanism by which these opportunities have been lost, the policy proposals he presents, and others like them, offer the hope of regaining them.

Phelps's image of the democratic, inclusive character of "modern capitalism" is probably romantic, and it may prove unrealistic. But he shows why it is worth fighting for. □

⁴My own book *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth* (Knopf, 2005) likewise argued for nonmaterial (moral) reasons for valuing the success of capitalist economic activity, and on that ground likewise lamented the prospect of reduced growth; but the moral benefits for which I argued are not the same as Phelps's, and the emphasis was on economic growth, however achieved, rather than capitalism per se.

BLIZZARD

As soon as I am doing nothing,
I am not able to do anything,
existing quietly behind lock and key,
like a cobweb's mesh.

It's four a.m.

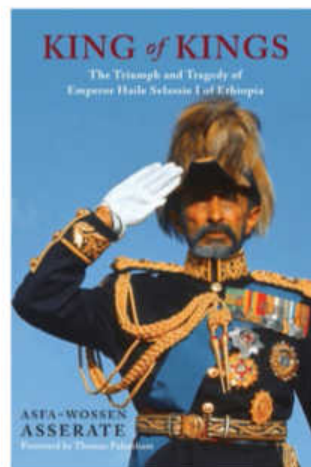
The voices of birds do not multiply into a force.
The sun does not engross from the east.
A small fly ponders the fingers on my right hand
like fat worms. Somewhere, in an empty room, a phone rings.
On the street, a bare tree shadows a brownstone.
(Be precise about objects, but reticent about feelings,
the master urged.)

I need everything within
to be livelier. Infatuation, sadism, lust:

I remember them, but memory of feeling is not feeling,
a parasite is not the meat it lived on.

—Henri Cole

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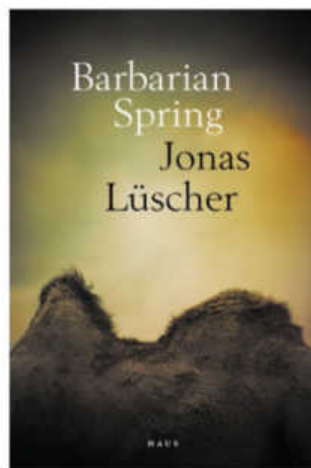
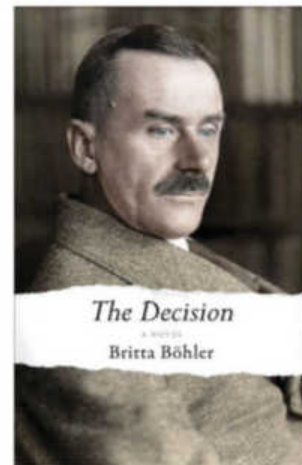
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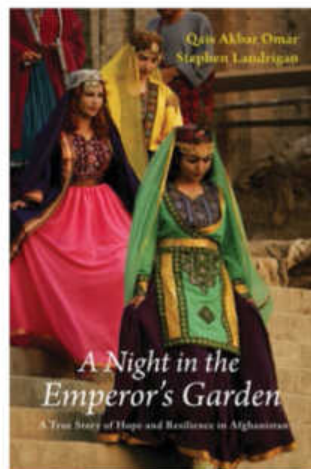
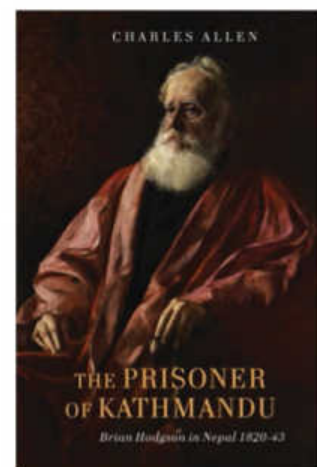
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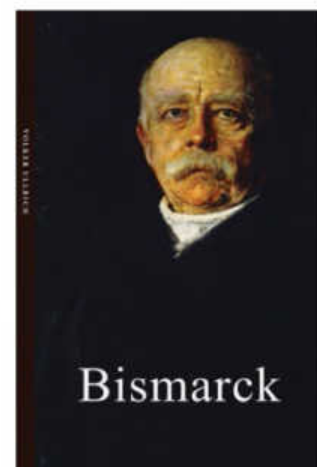
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China: Novelists Against the State

Perry Link

Death Fugue

by Sheng Keyi, translated from the Chinese by Shelly Bryant. Artarmon, Australia: Giramondo, 375 pp., AU\$29.95 (paper)

A Map of Betrayal

by Ha Jin. Pantheon, 280 pp., \$26.95

Kinder Than Solitude

by Yiyun Li. Random House, 327 pp., \$26.00; \$16.00 (paper)

The Dog: Stories

by Jack Livings. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 226 pp., \$25.00

Can writers help an injured society to heal? Did Ōe Kenzaburō, who traveled to Hiroshima in 1963 to interview survivors of the dropping of the atomic bomb on that city eighteen years earlier, and then published a moving book called *Hiroshima Notes*, help his compatriots to recover? Did Primo Levi, with his several books on the Holocaust, from the shocking *Survival in Auschwitz* (1947) to the profoundly humane *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), help Europe and the world to adjust to facts that might have seemed impossible to adjust to? It seems that writers indeed can do some good. It is not hard to think of other examples in modern history.

In China, the problem of moving beyond the disasters of Mao Zedong's rule and its consequences (today's authoritarian capitalism, despite its appearance of being opposite to Maoism in some ways, is one consequence) has been difficult. Chinese readers have not had enough help from their writers. Censorship of course is an important reason for this: Ōe Kenzaburō and Primo Levi did not have to write under regimes that were trying to repress them. The environment for Chinese writers has been closer to what Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in the Soviet Union, Václav Havel in Czechoslovakia, and Miklós Haraszti in Hungary had to cope with. Chinese who write candidly about Maoism and its consequences have often landed in prison, where Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo and human rights lawyer Pu Zhiqiang are today—or in exile, with Gao Xingjian, Su Xiaokang, Zheng Yi, Liao Yiwu, and others.

The phrase “write candidly” that I have just used raises an important issue, however. Fully candid writers in China stand at one end of a long spectrum. Almost no writer of any seriousness remains entirely unconcerned with the fate of humanistic values in post-Mao society. The question “What happened?” still lurks, as does the question “How can we look squarely at what happened, recover our balance, and move on?” But a problem always arises: How can a writer explore these

questions and at the same time avoid punishment for the exploration? The roles of creator and self-censor tend to collide, and some kind of indirection, or midcourse evasion, often seems necessary. It's as if a huge reverse magnet lay at the heart of the subject; writers move toward it, but then, as they draw near, are deflected to one side or another by a seemingly invisible force.

During the “scar literature” years (1977–1980) immediately following the death of Mao, the most common way to deflect was to keep things superficial or euphemistic. Deng Xiaoping's regime had labeled Mao's last ten years “a de-

much of the writing expressed their own shock, indirectly reflected.

Mo Yan, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2012, has deflected topics such as famine and political persecution by treating them as jokes; he makes some points, but softens them by presenting them as black humor.* Among writers who confront the disasters of the Mao era squarely (while avoiding prison or exile), Zhang Xianliang, author of a series of labor camp novels, perhaps does best. His evocation of inmates' psychology resembles Solzhenitsyn's in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*; but in the end, Zhang

flected on how, during his youth, years of immersion in Communist Party language had led him to accept hatred and lying as normal. He wrote:

These poisons of “Party culture” had permeated several generations of Chinese, and I was no exception. Even in the liberal tides of the 1980s, I had not been able to purge myself of them entirely. I knew at the time that Mao-style thinking and Cultural Revolution-style language had become ingrained in me, and my goal had been to transform myself from the bone marrow out. Hah!—Easier said than done. It may take me a lifetime to rid myself of the poison.

Liu was not the first Chinese writer to notice this problem. In the summer of 1989, when refugees from the June 4 massacre of that year gathered in Paris to form a “Chinese Front for Democracy,” they had a spirited debate over whether their manifesto in opposition to the Beijing regime should include words like *dadao* (knock down) or *tui-fan* (overthrow). One side said yes—*dadao* is just what we need. The other said no, we must avoid that kind of Communist jargon and use language like “work for an end to the one-Party system.” Each side took itself to be the more radical.

Writers who have tried to pull free from Party language have worried about how it affects not only be-

liefs but behavior in the world. In one of his labor camp novels, Zhang Xianliang tells how a camp inmate (Zhang himself, clearly) is able to escape and to roam around outside for a while, but then returns to the camp of his own accord. There are several reasons why he does so, and one of them is that his ideological training has led him to an undue respect for official correctness. “My ‘thoughts’ told me that I should return to the labor reform camp,” he writes.

The problem continues to the present day for Chinese writers, and the books I am reviewing here in some ways illustrate it. Censorship, broadly conceived, appears at three levels. Level one is: “I wrote X and the censor took it out.” Level two is: “I want to write X but stop myself from doing so, out of fear.” Level three is: “It is awkward even to form thought X in the language that I have inherited.”

Sheng Keyi's *Death Fugue* is an audacious challenge to the Chinese government's ban on mention of the Tiananmen massacre of 1989. She imagines a pile of excrement nine stories high in the central square of a city called Beiping. The government says the pile is merely gorilla dung and hauls it away. Students protest the removal. The allegory on you-know-what could not be clearer. A student leader



Ma Liang: Postman, No. 1, 2008; from Jiang Jiehong's *An Era Without Memories: Chinese Contemporary Photography on Urban Transformation*, published recently by Thames and Hudson

cade of catastrophe” and was urging writers to “liberate their thought.” But Deng also stressed “insistence on Party leadership and dictatorship of the proletariat,” and words like that caused most writers to settle for skimming the surface. They knew stories of murder, gouged eyes, and parents forced to pay for the bullet that executed their child, but they wrote only about “struggle” and “unhealthy tendencies.”

Another mode of deflection, which began during the scar years and flourished through the 1980s, was to move into modernist language. “Misty poets”—Bei Dao, Gu Cheng, Duo Duo, and others—wrote lines pregnant with meanings that the authorities knew they did not like even though they could not say exactly why. Fiction writers including Yu Hua, Su Tong, Han Shaogong, and Can Xue, whose childhoods or adolescent years were marred by the turmoil of late Maoism, created worlds that were filled with murderous toddlers, belching grandmothers, sunlight so hot that it melts the sand underfoot, horn-blowing deaf-mutes, hoodlums who grin as their electric drill penetrates someone's kneecap, family history that gets more and more grotesque the deeper one digs, and more. Their surreal tales and bizarre images owed something to their discovery of Kafka, Gabriel García Márquez, and others in the outside world. But

still dodges. He accepts a posture of basic loyalty to the Mao regime and a subordinate position for himself, saying, in effect, “Please keep me; we can do better next time.”

In the kinds of evasions I have noted so far, the writer is generally aware of the compromises he or she is making and controls how far they go. But there is another, subtler kind of accommodation as well. It is embedded in Party-approved phrases that have been part of the education that writers grew up with and that remain standard in the social milieu in which they live. At this level writers might not control or even notice what is happening. There is no evidence that Mao ever read Edwin Sapir or Benjamin Whorf, but the assumption that language use determines thought has been an article of faith in China's Communist movement for decades. Say *this*, say *this*, say *this*—until you believe this. The method has worked.

In 2003, Liu Xiaobo—four years after his release from a labor camp and five before the commencement of his current eleven-year prison term—re-

*See my comments on Mo Yan's “daft hilarity” in “Does This Writer Deserve the Prize?” *The New York Review*, December 6, 2012.

echoes a famous line from the actual 1989 student leader Chai Ling when she says, “This is the only way we will awaken the conscience of those indifferent to our plight...”

From Tiananmen, Sheng’s novel moves into an imagined future one-party dystopia, a brave new world with Chinese characteristics that she calls Swan Valley, where, among other things, sexual intercourse is forbidden and “it is logical to be inhumane.” Toward the authorities in Beijing, Sheng is saying, in effect, “I am going to kick a couple of your hornets’ nests and see what you are going to do about it.” One thing the authorities did about it was to ban *Death Fugue* in China, but it circulates informally anyway and has been published in translation abroad. It is not very carefully written; Sheng allows herself lines like “his eyes felt as if they had tendrils growing out of them, crawling like ants across the floorboards.” But she should get an A+ for moxie, and has admirers in China among readers who can get hold of the book.

In the terms of that 1989 debate among Chinese democrats in Paris, though, Sheng is fighting back using her opponents’ tactics. Perhaps without meaning to, she accepts much of the Maoist view that words are tools of battle and that victory over an adversary is the goal of writing. She wins some of her battles but in a sense lets the authoritarians set the terms of the contest.

Ha Jin and Yiyun Li present a different pattern. These two writers grew up in China, with Chinese as their native language, and later moved to the US, Ha Jin at age thirty and Li at twenty-

four. Both write fiction in English only. Their recent novels, *A Map of Betrayal* and *Kinder Than Solitude*, are about Chinese people who live on one or the other side of the Pacific, occasionally travel back and forth, and maintain ties of kinship or friendship on both sides. The two writers observe life sharply and with deep sympathy. Both (by chance) structure their novels using alternating chapters set in China and the US.

Ha Jin tells of Shang Weimin, a bright college graduate in China in the late 1940s, recently married, talented in languages, and naive about politics. The Communist Party of China, in its war with the Kuomintang, recruits Shang to be a mole in the United States Information Service in Shanghai, where he works as a translator from Chinese to English. With the Communist victory in 1949, the Party orders him to maintain his undercover niche with the Americans and to follow them—which he does, first to Okinawa and then to Washington, D.C., where he works for three decades in the CIA. At no point is he allowed to make contact with his wife or twin offspring in China: “The Party is caring for them.”

Lonely in the US, he takes a Chinese-American lover named Suzie Chao while also marrying an Irish-American waitress named Nellie, with whom he has a daughter, Lilian, who grows up to be a professor of Chinese history—and is the narrator of alternate chapters in the book. Eventually he rises in the CIA to a level where his secret reports become so vital to Beijing that Mao Zedong declares that “this man is worth four armored divisions.” In the

end, though, the FBI discovers Shang and he is sent to a US prison, where he commits suicide. Beijing insists that it has never heard of him.

It is a measure of Ha Jin’s powers of imagination that he can bring a reader into full empathy with a CIA-CCP double agent who has two families and a mistress. But he does. Great superspy Shang, at every stage of his life, seems ingenuous and vulnerable. When he says at the end that he “loved both China and the US,” it rings true. Throughout the telling, Ha Jin’s eye for detail is on display. In Shang’s aging apartment in Alexandria, Virginia, we see a “mirror stained with coppery blotches and the slats on the venetian blind drooping with age.”

Yiyun Li’s *Kinder Than Solitude* is about four high school students in Beijing, three girls and a boy. It recounts how one of the girls is poisoned, survives in a vegetative state for several years, and then dies. The two other girls move to the US, take jobs, and go through a number of marriages, both real and green-card-related, while the boy stays in China, making money and chasing women. The question of who did the poisoning haunts the story, and in the end the answer is apparent. But the interest of the novel is in its lonely, intriguing, not-quite-likable characters, who spend their days as if in vertical cylinders, adjacent to others but separated, as well as in the author’s incisive asides on life.

Both Ha Jin and Yiyun Li touch upon what the Communist Party calls “sensitive topics.” Shaoai, the poisoned

student in Li’s novel, is a veteran of the pro-democracy demonstrations that led to the Tiananmen massacre in 1989; she is eager to teach her younger cousin Ruyu, who is fresh from the hinterland, “to use her own brain to think [because] she’ll never learn that from school.” Ha Jin, borrowing the voice of his superspy, observes that Mao “sees China not as his responsibility but as his property.” Statements such as either of these would be almost scandalously bold if published or uttered publicly in Beijing. In these novels, though, they do not especially stand out; they are just part of the story. Sheng Keyi’s spirit of “watch me kick a hornets’ nest” is absent, and so, too, is Liu Xiaobo’s worry that Chinese writers are trapped in a language that deters or distorts expression of impermissible thoughts.

Might this be one reason why Yiyun Li and Ha Jin choose to write in English? I telephoned them to ask, and both said that it was. Ha Jin said that he enjoys the “native-speaker feel” that he has when writing in Chinese, and he does occasionally write Chinese-language poetry. But in his fiction he wants to write free from any need to guess what a censor might do, and for this English works better.

Li dislikes censorship as well, but to her an “internal constraint” seems at least as dangerous. When she writes in English she does not translate mentally from Chinese. (I’m sure this is true of Ha Jin as well.) Imagination and choice of words occur in English; the creative process is separated from the connotations, political or otherwise, of the Chinese language the writers grew up with. Free of both censorship and the

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conscious effort to resist censorship, they can go wherever they like.

Yiyun Li's prose is rich and rewards slow reading. *Kinder Than Solitude* begins this way:

Boyang had thought grief would make people less commonplace. The waiting room at the crematory, however, did not differentiate itself from elsewhere: the eagerness to be served first and the suspicion that others had snatched a better deal were reminiscent of the marketplace or stock exchange. A man shouldered him, reaching for multiple copies of the same form. Surely you have only one body to burn, Boyang laughed to himself, and the man glared back, as though personal loss had granted

him the right to what he was not owed by the world.

Li is good at showing the interiority of her characters, but also likes to punctuate her descriptions with comments on life in general. When a person in her story procrastinates, she writes a charming paragraph on "poor gullible Celia, believing, like most people, in a moment called *later*." Elsewhere she notes that "the desire for clarity [is] not far from the desire to deceive," because both cause us to tailor life into "presentable bites." Or: "The line between innocent and heartless, if indeed there is one, must be so subtle that only those most experienced with human nature can perceive it."

Li's story originates in China, and the country remains in the background, but

life there always seems a bit distressed and mysteriously out of focus; American life, by contrast, seems plain, perhaps even insipid, but somehow more "natural," even to immigrants from China. Li is not concerned about explaining this difference, however; her focus remains on her characters and on what they reveal of the human condition.

Ha Jin paints Chinese life more realistically. He describes how Lilian, the historian, explores her father's home village in Shandong province:

We stopped at a black brick house behind an iron-barred gate.... The instant we entered, two bronze-colored chickens took off. One landed on a straw stack while the other caught a top rail of the pigpen, both clucking and flut-

tering their feathers. An old man was weaving a mat with the skins of sorghum stalks in the cement-paved yard. At the sight of us he tottered to his feet, his gray beard scanty but almost six inches long.

The country's troubles come into focus, too. Lilian, responsible China-watcher that she is, touches on most of the well-reported issues: pollution, food fraud, wealth inequality, conspicuous consumption, emigration of the elite, home-registry (*hukou*) bias, the razing of homes for development, and government demands that people love the government, among others. But she offers much more than a laundry list. Her (i.e., Ha Jin's) reflections on "Chinese character" are as penetrating as anything modern Chinese literature

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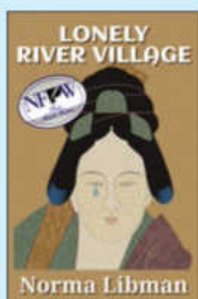
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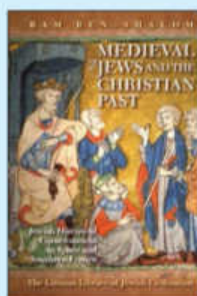
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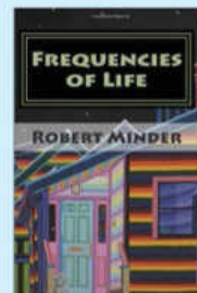


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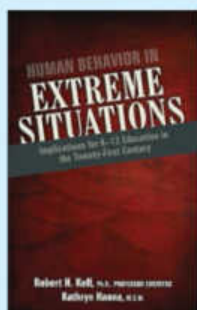
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has seen since the great story writer Lu Xun (1881–1936) raised the issue nearly a century ago.

Lilian observes that much of the “ardent patriotism” in China today is born of insecurity; a citizen loves the state not because the state is lovable but because it gives a citizen a stronger face to present to the world. Chinese character includes “many good qualities”—“diligence, resourcefulness, modesty, [and] respect for old people”—but also two very unfortunate ones: “petty cleverness and practical-mindedness.” Ha Jin here refers to the tendency, easy to notice in Chinese fiction and life, to analyze all the factors in a situation and figure out the smartest route to personal advantage. This trait, for Ha Jin, gets in the way of doing “what’s meaningful in the long run.” He quotes George

Bernard Shaw that “the reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself; therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man”; then he has Lilian tell her Chinese graduate students that “I hope that when you’re young, you cherish your unreasonableness, which, like the fire of life, might dwindle as you grow older.”

Ha Jin’s cultural criticism runs deeper than anything Jack Livings, author of the stories in *The Dog*, attempts. Livings is less immersed in Chinese culture than Ha Jin, and in any case Ha Jin’s degree of candor might seem insensitive coming from a foreigner. But Livings does have a remarkable talent for empathy with people of several kinds:

an ambitious housewife, a young Uighur, an old farmer, a cynical teacher, a frightened scientist, a worn-out journalist, and others. His metaphors are vivid. A newspaper office contains “printouts of stories stacked like shale deposits on every available surface” and a badly written speech exhibits “a style that approximated ground meat shooting into a sausage casing.”

Livings must rely on imagination to write about China because he does not have many years of personal experience there. He spent a semester of college in Beijing in 1994 and returned for some traveling in 1997. “That’s all it took,” he said in a 2014 interview, and “the place had its hooks in me.” He began to read “everything I could get my hands on” about China. He tries to get the details of Chinese life right in his stories,

but sometimes Western patterns slip in anyway, as when, for example, a man yells during the heat of an argument that “I’m calling a psychologist if you don’t pull it together!”—a line much more imaginable in New York than in Beijing. But Livings’s efforts to imagine and evoke the inner experience of people remain impressive nonetheless.

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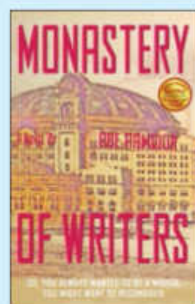
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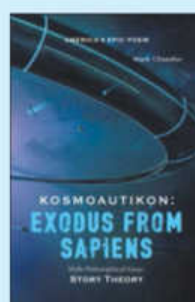
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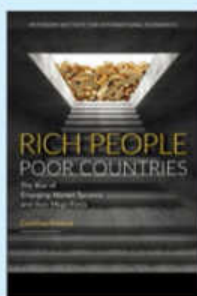
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beyond what the laws of physics will permit, but “the Party outranked physical laws, scientific fact, logic.”

Moreover, a vice-premier holds the secret, which he shares with the workers: “Engage in successful practices.” Livings invents this detail, but it is perfect. The combination of grammatical wholeness and semantic vacuity, in which the speaker pretends wisdom but in fact hands problems—and fearsome responsibilities—to others, is a staple

in Communist Chinese jargon. Livings also captures the responses of the workers well. They suffer fear, sleeplessness, and third-degree burns in building the sarcophagus, but in the end do achieve the great, glorious, correct result. “Their work finished,” Livings writes, “they averted their eyes from the immortal home of the Chairman.”

My favorite story in the collection is the shortest. Called “Switchback,” it is about a schoolteacher who is killed

when a truck hits him as he is riding his bicycle on a mountain road. He is the only son of his parents, two uneducated farmers, who arrive, riding on their “two-stroke farm vehicle [that] resembled a mantis,” to do their duty of collecting the body while struggling mightily to cover their grief. The parents must pause while Public Security takes photos of the accident scenes, which, in Livings’s depictions, are poignant enough to make a reader’s

continued reading a bit difficult. The Public Security personnel, it is worth noting, appear in the story with no subtle connotations either supporting or rebelling against Mao and his legacy. They are bit players. Could the lines that mention them translate well into post-Mao Chinese language? Or would the fearsome term *gonganju* (public security bureau) inevitably jolt Chinese-language readers into a different state of mind? I wonder. □

Stalin: His Daughter & His Crimes

Amy Knight

**Stalin’s Daughter:
The Extraordinary and Tumultuous
Life of Svetlana Alliluyeva**
by Rosemary Sullivan.
Harper, 741 pp., \$35.00

**Stalin:
New Biography of a Dictator**
by Oleg V. Khlevniuk,
translated from the Russian
by Nora Seligman Favorov.
Yale University Press, 392 pp., \$35.00

In her revealing biography of Stalin’s daughter, Svetlana Alliluyeva, Rosemary Sullivan portrays a woman who was never able to find herself. Her yearnings for a lifelong partner were never fulfilled and she was constantly disappointed in her choices of places to call home. Yet she carried on with determination until 2011, when she died of cancer at the age of eighty-five, with a handful of devoted friends who stuck by her despite her unpredictable temperament, and an American-born daughter who loved her unconditionally until the end.

It is no wonder that Svetlana could not lead what most of us think of as a normal life, since she lived in the shadow of one of the most ruthless dictators of the twentieth century. (Her older brother, Vasily, died of alcoholism at age forty.) But Sullivan’s biography takes us beyond this obvious truth and helps us understand, through Svetlana’s stormy history, the nature of regimes that are as brutal as Stalin’s was.¹

When her mother, Nadezhda Alliluyeva, committed suicide in 1932, Svetlana was six years old. She was then at the mercy of her father, who, as she wrote, became the “final, unquestioned authority for me in everything.” By this time Stalin was well on his way to total dictatorship of the Soviet state. He still had political enemies to get rid of—Nikolai Bukharin, Lev Kamenev, and Leon Trotsky among others—but they would soon be vanquished. Kamenev and Bukharin were sentenced to death in show trials during the Great Purges in the 1930s, and Trotsky (exiled in Mexico) was assassinated on Stalin’s



Joseph Stalin and his daughter Svetlana, Moscow, 1933

orders in 1940. In the meantime, Svetlana became Stalin’s “little hostess” and “housekeeper,” who wrote mock orders to him and other Politburo members. She was thrown into the bizarre milieu of his social life, such as it was—the gatherings, with vodka and Georgian wine and often music, of Stalin and his henchmen, who were willing to do anything, including murder, in order to gain the favor of their leader.

For Svetlana there was a deeply sinister element in these occasions. Sullivan reproduces a famous photograph of her at around seven or eight, looking very uncomfortable on the lap of Lavrenty Beria, at the time party chief of Georgia, but soon to become the head of the NKVD (the secret police). There is also a lesser-known photograph in the Russian archives, dating to about the same time, of Beria reclining possessively with Svetlana in his arms during a vacation with Stalin on the Black Sea.² Beria, who was later to be accused by numerous sources of being a sexual predator who habitually raped women, some very young, was a constant figure in Svetlana’s life until Stalin died in 1953. There were never suggestions that he abused her, but his implicit possessiveness of her at this young age may well have felt threatening.

²This photograph is reproduced in my book *Beria: Stalin’s First Lieutenant* (Princeton University Press, 1993).

With this upbringing, it is understandable that Svetlana had such evident difficulties in establishing relationships with men—she married and divorced four times—when she reached adulthood. In fact, Stalin’s treatment of his daughter is very telling. Khrushchev recalls in his memoirs a drunken evening at Stalin’s dacha, Blizhnaia, when the men were dancing with each other, and Svetlana, then in her mid-twenties, appeared. Stalin forced her to participate, much against her will. When she tried to stop, saying she was tired,

Stalin grabbed her by the forelock of her hair with his fist and pulled. I could see her face turning red and tears welling up in her eyes. I felt so sorry for Svetlanka. He pulled harder and dragged her back onto the dance floor.

Unfortunately for Svetlana, Stalin’s personal cruelty to her family was devastating. In the years leading up to World War II and afterward, he had most of her close relatives, those she depended on for solace and love, either shot or sent to the Gulag. They included Aleksandr Svanidze, Stalin’s brother-in-law from his first marriage, and Aleksandr’s wife Maria, both arrested during the purges for “anti-Soviet activities” and later executed; Nadezhda Alliluyeva’s beloved older sister, Anna Redens, sent to the Gulag in 1948, and her husband, Stanislav

Redens, a high-ranking police official, executed in 1940; Svetlana’s first cousin on her mother’s side, Kyra Alliluyeva, arrested in 1948, and Kyra’s mother, Zhenya Alliluyeva, arrested in 1947 on bogus charges.

Svetlana and the members of her mother’s extended family blamed Beria for persecuting them, although this did not prevent Svetlana from spending a great deal of time at Beria’s dacha with his wife Nino and son Sergo when she was growing up. She even fell in love with Sergo and wanted to marry him, but he was already betrothed to Marfa Peshkova, the daughter of the writer Maxim Gorky. Svetlana, who had trouble controlling her passions, confronted Peshkova, saying that she had always loved Sergo. This unsuccessful effort to break up their engagement caused her to lose the friendship of both of them.

Beria had a personal rivalry with Stanislav Redens and was eager to have him eliminated as an “enemy of the people.” But Beria would never have dared to move against Stalin’s brother-in-law without the direct approval of the Soviet leader. Indeed, the evidence is overwhelming that Stalin was the driving force behind the persecution of Nadezhda’s family. Stalin also had Svetlana’s first lover, the Jewish movie director Aleksei Kapler, arrested during the war and sent to a gulag in Siberia after Kapler published a love letter—to a thinly disguised Svetlana—in *Pravda*. Stalin demanded that Svetlana give him all of Kapler’s letters and told her, “Your Kapler is a British spy. He’s under arrest.”

Biographers of Stalin have long speculated on what might have caused him to become such a morally depraved man. The eminent Russian historian Oleg Khlevniuk, in a new, carefully researched biography, dismisses the widely held belief that Stalin, a Georgian, was abused in his childhood by a drunken father and was brought up in dire financial circumstances:

By many measures, Stalin’s childhood was ordinary or even comfortable. A number of accounts attest that his father was not only a skilled cobbler, but also that he was able to read Georgian and converse in several languages, including Russian. His mother had received some home schooling and could also read and write in Geor-

¹It is worth noting that Svetlana Alliluyeva, like her father, still holds considerable interest for Russians. Several documentaries on her life, with film footage from the archives and insightful interviews with her relatives, have appeared in Russia over the past few years and can be found on the Internet.

gian.... During [Stalin's] early years, [his father] apparently was quite successful and his family was well provided for.

It is true that Stalin's father was a drinker who occasionally beat his son and eventually abandoned his family, but his mother, Keke, Khlevniuk writes, was "a woman of strong character and a hard worker" who "did everything she could to facilitate [her son's] education." According to Khlevniuk, who cites excerpts from loving letters Stalin wrote to his mother in Georgia after he became the Soviet leader, he "felt genuine affection" for her.

Thanks to the determined efforts of his mother, Stalin, beginning at age nine, was able to attend the Gori Theological School from 1888 to 1894. The language of instruction was Russian, which would prove a huge advantage for him in making a career outside Georgia. By all accounts "Soso," as he was called, was an excellent and ambitious student who was then able to go on to enroll in the Tiflis (Tbilisi) Theological Seminary on a scholarship for the next four and a half years.

Khlevniuk describes how the stifling and repressive regime of the seminary, along with the strict enforcement of Russification—an insult to Georgian pride—created a spirit of rebellion in the young Stalin, as it did among many of his classmates. Stalin became infatuated with Marxism and joined an illegal social democratic group. Yet while his seminary experience may help us to understand how Stalin became a revolutionary Bolshevik, it does not explain why he later became what can only be described as a psychopath.

The suicide of Nadezhda Alliluyeva in 1932 may well have contributed to Stalin's increasing lust for power and his paranoid distrust of those around him. By most accounts, the marriage of Stalin and Nadezhda, who was twenty-three years younger than her husband, had fallen apart. In his frequent outbursts of anger Stalin shouted obscenities at his wife. According to Sullivan, Nadezhda might also have been upset by reports of mass famine in the countryside, along with the growing political repression that Stalin and his fellow Bolsheviks were imposing. Svetlana herself eventually came to this conclusion. But Khlevniuk disagrees:

There is absolutely no hard evidence that Nadezhda objected to her husband's policies.... Her letters give the impression that she, like the rest of the Bolshevik elite, was completely isolated from the suffering of tens of millions outside the Kremlin walls.

Whatever the reasons for his wife's suicide—there were claims that she suffered from mental illness—it was a deep and humiliating blow to Stalin. He later told relatives: "She did a very bad thing....; she maimed me for the rest of my life." Svetlana observed in her first book, *Twenty Letters to a Friend*, written in 1963:

Later, when I was grown up, I was told that my father had been terribly shaken [by the suicide]. He was shaken because he couldn't understand why it had happened. Why had such a terrible stab in the back been dealt to him, of all people?

Sullivan writes that although Svetlana did not learn that her mother had committed suicide until she was a teenager, the tragedy also was a turning point for her: "Svetlana always divided her life into two parts: before and after her mother's death, when her world changed utterly." But one wonders how much Svetlana's idealized vision of her mother corresponded with reality. Both Sullivan and Khlevniuk mention that Nadezhda Alliluyeva was distant with her children and entrusted them to nursemaids and governesses while she pursued an advanced technical education. In a letter written a month before she gave birth to Svetlana, Nadezhda expressed regret that she was going to be saddled with more family responsibilities.

Although Svetlana witnessed the disappearance of many close relatives, her privileged life as the dictator's daughter shielded her from many of the horrors that were occurring in the Soviet Union. During the postwar years, Svetlana pursued her studies in modern history and later Russian literature at Moscow University with plans to do academic research. She had lovers, and married and divorced twice, bearing a boy and then a girl from the two marriages.

Meanwhile, her father was engaged in a fierce campaign of mass repression. According to Khlevniuk, between 1946 and 1952, seven million people (a million per year) were sentenced for political crimes. As of January 1953, two months before Stalin's death, some 3 percent of the population was either in the Gulag or had been forced into internal exile. The situation was especially drastic in the newly annexed Baltic areas of the Soviet Union, where hundreds of thousands were executed or imprisoned during pacification campaigns.

How much did Svetlana know of these terrible abuses? Much later, in *Only One Year*, written in the United States five years after *Twenty Letters*, she claims that in 1948 she overheard a telephone conversation in which Stalin ordered the murder of the Jewish theater director Solomon Mikhoels, in a staged traffic accident. After that, she wrote:

It had become impossible to talk to him. I avoided meeting him, and he had no particular wish to see me.... I had no feeling left for my father, and after every meeting, I was in a hurry to get away.

In fact, Svetlana did continue to see Stalin and to send her "Papochka" (daddy), as she affectionately addressed him, loving letters. In *Twenty Letters*, Svetlana conveys little of this disillusionment with her father, even though Khrushchev had, in 1956, revealed Stalin's crimes in his so-called Secret Speech at the Twentieth Communist Party Congress. (Svetlana was given a copy of the speech by Presidium member Anastas Mikoyan before Khrushchev delivered it.) The revelations were devastating for Svetlana, who began using her mother's last name and whose numerous affairs became the subject of Kremlin gossip. Eleven years later, in 1967, she defected to the West, asking for asylum at the US embassy in New Delhi during a visit to India. Svetlana had traveled to India for the funeral of Brajesh Singh, an Indian Communist whom she had

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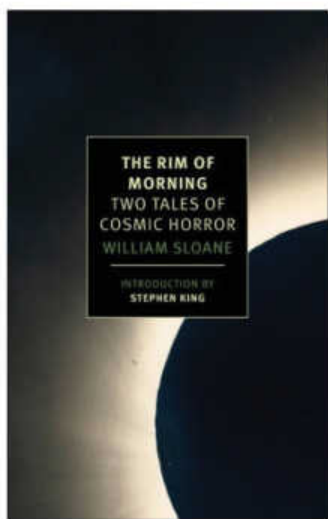
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met and fallen in love with in Moscow. Her two-month stay in India convinced her that she could never go back to the Soviet Union, despite the fact that she would leave her two children, Joseph and Katya, behind.

In a news conference upon her arrival in the US, Svetlana was cautious in her words about Stalin, stressing that she had loved and respected him, and only acknowledging briefly that he had committed crimes. As Elizabeth Hardwick noted in these pages in 1967 in a review of *Twenty Letters*:

[Svetlana] has just enough necessary blindness: the blindness necessary to survive in the Stalin household.... Sympathetic persons will say that she really did not know the extent of his guilt. Actually, there is probably very little she didn't know about her father and one could even guess that her late discovery of her mother's suicide was not quite genuine and that she guessed something much earlier.

Whatever Svetlana's ambivalence, it is remarkable that she carried out the ultimate act of rebellion against her father, and the Soviet system, by defecting and openly denouncing the regime. As Sullivan's biography demonstrates, Svetlana's life in the West was a struggle, emotionally and financially. After she became drawn to the Taliesin Fellowship, dedicated to the memory of Frank Lloyd Wright, she had a disastrous marriage to the architect Wesley Peters, who oversaw the construction of the Guggenheim Museum and with whom she had her second daughter, Olga.

This was only the beginning of a series of failures that left her emotionally unbalanced and at times impoverished. She had stormy breakups with friends, accusing them of not doing enough to help her. They included the former US ambassador to Moscow, George Kennan, who had tried hard to support her. She had a change of heart about her home country, returning in 1984 with the intention of resuming her life as a Soviet citizen. After several months there with Olga, during which she tried unsuccessfully to reestablish relations with her two older children, Svetlana left the Soviet Union for good. After living in Bristol, England, she moved back to the US. She died in Wisconsin in 2011, not far from Taliesin, from which she was by then completely estranged.

Svetlana's constant moves and the disruptions in her friendships may be seen as reflecting her troubled past. In reproaching and breaking with people in the West who tried to help her, she seemed almost paranoid, like her father; yet she was also capable of the kind of love and affection, especially for her daughter Olga, of which Stalin was completely devoid. She was right to realize that Stalin could not have defeated all his political rivals and determined the fate of millions without the complicity of many fellow Bolsheviks, including Stanislav Redens, her beloved uncle. Stalin was also able to exploit a docile population that was willing to be cowed into submission and accept the lies they were fed by state propaganda. To concentrate only on Stalin's psychopathology as a cause of the terrible horrors of his era ignores the men who surrounded him and who were equally depraved.

That said, Khrushchev's claims, in his 1956 Secret Speech, that much of the repression under Stalin was the work of Beria are not credible, however much Svetlana wanted to believe them at the time. The irony of making Beria the scapegoat for Stalin's crimes is that Beria, while as evil and bloodthirsty as Stalin, never manipulated him. On the contrary, Beria and his colleagues were terrified of Stalin until the day he died. Beria managed to survive a huge threat to his position when Stalin initiated a purge of his Party allies in Georgia in 1952. But Beria remained aware, as did his colleagues, that the ax could fall at any moment.

As these two books make clear, there is much to be understood about Russia today by examining Soviet history. Khlevniuk's description of the Stalinist system after the war has eerie similarities to contemporary Russia, particularly regarding the xenophobic anti-Western sentiment now used by the Kremlin to justify Russian aggression in Ukraine. "Like any totalitarian regime," Khlevniuk observes,

the Stalinist dictatorship needed to keep society mobilized. This goal was achieved both by provoking anxiety about external threats and by using domestic groups as scapegoats, thereby channeling dissatisfaction away from the country's leaders.

In the case of Stalin after the war the domestic enemy became Jews, who were increasingly portrayed as in collusion with the United States. At a meeting of the top Party leadership in late 1952, Stalin stated: "Any Jew-nationalist is an agent of American intelligence. Jew-nationalists believe that their nation was saved by the USA."

Today also the Kremlin accuses members of the political opposition of collaborating with the West in an effort to destroy Russia. And for some there have been terrible consequences. Boris Nemtsov, the outspoken Russian democrat, was gunned down near the Kremlin in late February of this year. Nemtsov was compiling an exposé of Russian involvement in Ukraine. We still do not know who ordered his murder, but it sent a clear message to other Russian democrats that they could be the next victims. Vladimir Putin has created a climate of fear that recalls Stalin's times.

In the postwar period Stalin presided over a major investment in the Soviet armed forces, particularly in nuclear weapons, while the economic situation deteriorated. (Khlevniuk writes that military expenditures grew by 60 percent in 1951 and 40 percent in 1952.) People in rural areas, where there was complete stagnation in agriculture, suffered the most because of the new obligations and taxes imposed on collective farms. According to official Soviet statistics, there were no more cattle in the Soviet Union in early 1953 than there had been in 1939. But urban areas suffered as well, particularly because of chronically underfunded housing. In early 1953 the average size of residential housing in Soviet cities was 4.5 square meters per resident. Fewer than half of such units had running water or sewage hookups. And only 26 percent had central heating.

Like Stalin, Putin is also pursuing an ambitious military program. He announced in June that the Kremlin would spend over \$400 billion during the next five years on new ships, planes, tanks, and nuclear missiles. And again, the burden will fall on Russian citizens, who are already experiencing a decline in real wages, the deterioration of roads, education and health care, and even food shortages. This situation is only partly due to the West's economic sanctions and the steep drop in oil prices. The Kremlin has for years neglected Russia's infrastructure, and inefficient, corrupt state enterprises dominate the country's economy.

Just as in Stalin's time, Russian people today are fed a continuous stream of nationalist, anti-Western propaganda that appeals to their sense of patriotism. Although the use of the Internet continues to grow in Russia, state-controlled television is still the main source of news for over 50 percent of the population. Putin's personality cult is fast approaching that of Stalin. The adulation of Putin as the father of the Russian nation has grown significantly since the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Ukraine. Russia's increasing international isolation has created a siege mentality in the country, which lends itself to hero-worship of the national leader.

Stalin considered himself indispensable—his countrymen felt the same way—and made no plans for a successor. When he died suddenly in March 1953, his heirs had to pull themselves together quickly to form a ruling oligarchy. But in the absence of an established process for political succession, their coalition soon fell apart and a bitter power struggle took place, ending in Beria's arrest and execution.

Putin has a similar hold on the political succession process today. Russia has presidential elections (now every six years), but opposition to the Kremlin has become so marginalized that elections are meaningless. In all likelihood the winning presidential candidate in 2018 will be Putin, and in 2024 (Putin cannot have more than two successive terms as president) there will be a Kremlin-designated successor, just as in Soviet days (and as in 2008 when Dmitri Medvedev filled in between Putin's presidencies). This scenario will be averted only if public dissatisfaction with the Kremlin grows significantly as Russia's economic difficulties become more acute.

In the conclusion to his book, Khlevniuk expresses concern that "a significant portion of Russian society seeks recipes for the present by looking to the Stalinist past." He asks rhetorically whether Russia is in danger of repeating the mistakes of the Stalin period. In fact the process of repetition has already begun. As Dmitry Gudkov, a courageously outspoken liberal deputy in the Russian Duma, recently said:

The legitimate state is being destroyed by censorship and persecutions. Hardly anybody has the power to stop the country [from] sinking into obscurantism and lawlessness.... The clans who really make decisions in Russia calculate their moves by reading Putin's gestures, his moods. Nothing makes sense any longer.

A Hero of the European Mind

Anthony Grafton

Peiresc's Mediterranean World

by Peter N. Miller.
Harvard University Press,
630 pp., \$39.95

Nicolas Fabri de Peiresc (1580–1637) was the exemplary polymath of an age that swarmed with them. His curiosity embraced everything: the deep past and the immediate present, exact sciences and applied ones, philology and philosophy, fossils and antiquities. He collected manuscripts and printed books, curious vessels and engraved gems. His files burst with data on the movements of the planets and the currents of the oceans; on the arts and customs of Muslims, Samaritans, and Eastern Christians; on the texts of the scriptures and the fragments of the ancient philosophers.

Peiresc was never satisfied with what his own dark, heavy-lidded eyes could take in directly. So he reached out from his house in Provence, as remote from the world of books as “if we were amidst the sands of Libya,” and spun webs of correspondence across Europe and beyond. Letters arrived unpredictably, since Europe’s postal system was still under construction in his lifetime. But they came from everywhere—from Constantinople and Beirut to Leiden and London. When a batch of fresh ones arrived together, especially if they were not soaked with vinegar to prevent the spread of plague and were accompanied by “beautiful books” and “such a good part of news of the world,” they filled Peiresc with excitement. He felt transported “back to the middle of the Louvre”—or across the Seine in the rue des Poitevins with his friends in the Cabinet Dupuy, the information crossroads of Paris. He not only answered his mail punctiliously, but also annotated his letters as systematically as his other files and reports, and integrated them into his vast apparatus.

Peiresc kept all of his working papers in loose bundles, organized by subject, and added to and changed them when new information became available. After his death in 1637, collectors eagerly bought up and scattered his collections of books and manuscripts, coins and other antiquities. But the papers endured, to be fixed and bound: frozen parts that had once moved inside a vast paper machine. One hundred and nineteen volumes remain in the Bibliothèque Inguimbertaine, the erudite glory of the small Provençal city of Carpentras.

It’s a spectacle to deter the cowardly, or even the prudent: 70,000 closely written pages, which record the day-by-day work of someone who crossed every border on the continent of early modern erudition. Tracking Peiresc’s work in any one of his chosen fields—learning how he mastered the history of Provence, for example, or how he orchestrated observations around the Mediterranean of the lunar eclipse of August 28, 1635—is demanding. It requires the historian both to cut paths through the great paper forests that Peiresc raised and to master the lost disciplines that he practiced, at his own high level. For Peiresc was no Mr. Casaubon, eternally soaking himself in



'Landscape with Roman Ruins'; detail of a painting by Herman Posthumus, 1536

the suds of yesterday’s learning. His efforts won the respect of experts across Europe and beyond.

Peter N. Miller began his studies of Peiresc by reconstructing his subject’s specialized work as an antiquarian and Orientalist. In his now classic *Peiresc’s Europe* (2000) and a long series of articles and monographs he showed, with learning and panache, why these apparently recondite pursuits won the admiring interest of Peiresc’s eminent biographer Pierre Gassendi and many others. Peiresc emerged as the exemplary practitioner of early modern Europe’s New History: a form of scholarship that preferred material to textual evidence, used it to reconstruct institutions and rituals rather than to narrate events, and extended to the Near and Far East as well as to Europe. His equable temperament, cosmopolitan curiosity, and Stoic commitment to sociability with all other genuinely learned men helped him attain this status. But so, above all, did his mastery of technical detail.

In his new book as well, Miller argues that the details matter deeply. Much of Peiresc’s originality as a thinker about past and present emerges only when the minutiae of his practices go under the scholar’s microscope. Miller is as tireless as Peiresc in his attention to them. Join Miller in watching Peiresc drawing up a genealogy, for example, and you see him lay out his diagrams in an unusual way: not as top-down trees that treat the descent of politi-

cal and familial authority as fated and unavoidable, but as side-to-side flow charts. Does the new format make a difference? Yes, a radical one. It allows the genealogist to find space for the interruptions and contingencies that affect real people and their families. Like many contemporary historians, Peiresc believed that birth and ancestry were important facts. Unlike most of them, however, he also admitted that lines of descent were labile and easily broken—a crucial recognition in an age when dynastic principle still shaped the maps of states.

The Peiresc who emerges from Miller’s new study differs from the Peiresc of his previous works in two crucial ways. First, he is now portrayed not as a practitioner of any single intellectual craft—even the all-encompassing one of the antiquaries. The hero of *Peiresc’s Mediterranean World* was an intellectual omnivore who discovered new worlds wherever he looked. Three years before he died, Peiresc wrote a series of long letters to his friend the philosopher Marin Mersenne. In them he described how he had listened to a galley slave singing a song learned from “black Moors” in Africa. Peiresc not only paid close attention to this performance; he found a musician to help him transcribe the tune into musical notation, wrote out the Turkish words as the slave remembered them, and savored the song itself as “full of grace,” though

it showed “a taste different from our usage in some manner.” Like Aby Warburg, Peiresc knew that you find God in the details.

Second, Miller’s Peiresc emerges as a hedgehog, as well as a fox. This passionate and scrupulous observer of little things also saw one big thing: the Mediterranean itself. As an astronomer and cartographer, he established the sea’s length and redrew its contours. As a virtuoso and connoisseur, he collected its natural and human antiquities, from fossils twisted in artful forms by nature to gems engraved in complex ways by men. As a philologist and antiquarian, he cataloged the records and recreated the rituals of its civilizations, from the Near East and Africa to his own southern France.

Those who traveled and worked in the Mediterranean of Peiresc’s own day interested him as deeply as their ancient counterparts. After his early voyages, Miller notes, he was “a landlocked orientalist.” Peiresc depended on the kindness of friends and strangers, whom he equipped with lists of things to find and questions to answer on their travels. The vast archive he created shows that he took as deep an interest in the strange, fascinating streams of traveling scholars and diplomats, sailors and artisans whom he turned into his informants and agents as he did in the ancient manuscripts and fresh citrus fruits that they brought him. He saved their letters and recorded their words as scrupulously as he excerpted documents.

Peiresc’s Mediterranean world was big. To the southeast it almost touched the Red Sea, and connected to the vast trading system of the premodern world in the Indian Ocean. Far to the west, it opened into the Atlantic, and allowed the expanding naval and mercantile powers of the north to enter it. All around it, empires and smaller states, independent cities and subject peoples, navies and pirates jostled and competed for space. Peiresc wanted to know it all. He followed politics, recording wars and rumors of wars, and studied naval affairs. But he also set himself to learn everything, however undramatic, that might affect the movement of people and ideas. He learned how long it took a ship to cast off from the dock and then to cross a given stretch of ocean; what paths sailors most often took across the sea, and why; how to pack goods for safe transport; how to send messages, to move money, and to retrieve valuable items from quarantine or after theft by pirates.

In the middle of the twentieth century, Fernand Braudel fascinated readers of his history of the Mediterranean in the age of Philip II by showing in graphic detail that “distances were not invariable, fixed once and for all. There might be ten or a hundred different distances, and one could never be sure, before setting out or making decisions, what timetable fate would impose.” The ocean was less a natural formation than a human one: human skill and human incompetence determined its size in any given case. Peiresc had read his Braudel—or rather, he had navigated, through his dozens of

agents and friends, every difficulty that Braudel found attested in the records of travel and expeditions. And he recorded them.

In recent years, scholars have come back to the Mediterranean not single spies but in battalions. They have taught us how Ottomans and Greeks, Venetians and Genoese, Italians and northerners coexisted and competed on the sea in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They have shown how, even as the empires clashed, skilled information brokers transmitted news and rumors across the sea, while others slid with equal skill from identity to identity, religion to religion, and side to side in the conflict of empires.*

Peiresc's archive—so Miller argues—adds another, distinctive historical version of the Mediterranean to the ones that his colleagues have crafted. It is based not in the center but in what now seems the periphery: Marseilles, a city poorly served by conventional economic records, though richly supplied, in its day, with ocean-going ships of every class. Looking through Peiresc's eyes, we gain a vivid, three-dimensional vision of how French commerce and travel operated in his time—as well as of the sailors and merchants, priests of many religions and practitioners of many crafts who populated Peiresc's Mediterranean.

Peiresc's Mediterranean World is written, like *Peiresc's Europe*, in energetic, eloquent prose. But this time Miller uses an experimental form of exposition to make his readers see with new eyes. He does not tell a single story, but moves to the tune of two steps forward, one step back, at times following chronological order, at times following thematic order. Blocks of primary material, translated (sometimes a little too literally) and explicated, occupy the center of the text.

Because Miller tracks the sources so closely, his narratives often end badly or simply fizzle out. Like all archives, that of Peiresc tells a lot of shaggy dog stories. Messages go out but answers don't come back. Letters and books, payments and people disappear. Some of Peiresc's most determined pursuits—such as his effort to obtain a copy of a Hexaglot Psalter—a manuscript of the Psalms with texts in different languages in parallel columns—end

in defeat for Peiresc himself (though the manuscript in question ended up in the Vatican Library). Most histories omit or compress this side of the archive. Miller, by contrast, emphasizes it—and thus gives the reader the rare chance to share his own double vision: to see the Mediterranean as Peiresc did, and to see Peiresc at work as his devoted historian has.

This approach has its disadvantages. Repetitions occur, not all of which serve an obvious function. Peiresc's examinations of vases from the East appear so many times that they begin to seem like his (or Miller's) hobbyhorse. Yet the advantages of Miller's method far outweigh its defects. Peiresc's most novel inquiries—his efforts to record and study the galley slave's song, for example—were not easy to classify in his own time, and would have been difficult to publish in any recognizable form, then or now. His finished writings usually lacked the sprawling range and visionary curiosity that give his manuscripts their special quality: "When Peiresc actually wrote his *History of Provence* it came out looking like any other chronicle." The only way to meet Peiresc at work on his full range of self-imposed tasks is to follow Miller on his plunge into the documents.

What then was Peiresc?

A contemporary like Gassendi might have called him a virtuoso or a *curieux*. Miller, however, does not try to fix Peiresc's position in one or another constellation of star academics and scholars. Instead, as he works through the archive, he lets a new view of how Peiresc made knowledge slowly emerge. Intellectual commerce, in his world, turns out to be closely related to commerce of the more conventional kind.

When Francis Bacon imagined his ideal society, the New Atlantis, he staffed its central experimental station, Salomon's House, not only with thinkers and experimenters, but also with twelve fellows "that sail into foreign countries, under the names of other nations (for our own we conceal); who bring us the books, and abstracts, and patterns of experiments of all other parts." He called them "Merchants of Light." Peiresc, Miller argues, already employed merchants of light: the merchants who brought him collectibles and information, and on whom he depended for much more than that.

Merchants play very specific, limited roles in most histories of early modern European thought. They accept commissions to buy manuscripts or mummies as a modest part of their preparation, financial and practical, for voyages that were mostly dedicated to buying and selling normal commodities like fish and cloth. They head off into a world largely unknown to those they represent. Eventually they bring home the treasures on which Peiresc and other sedentary collectors have built up seductive dossiers—and re-

veal that many of them aren't treasures after all. Or they produce baroque excuses for failing to do so. Or they simply disappear.

Peiresc, Miller holds, worked with merchants in a very different way. It's not just that he learned his way around his sea, the biggest thing he knew, through the eyes, minds, and mouths of the Marseilles merchants. His own practices strikingly resembled theirs. Mandarins of the Republic of Letters often composed their letters in formal Latin. Peiresc wrote his letters, as the merchants did, in French or Italian. Mandarins generally concentrated on the source materials they wanted and

cluded many survivals from much more ancient times—a form of comparative conjecture that one might have expected Peiresc to reserve for himself:

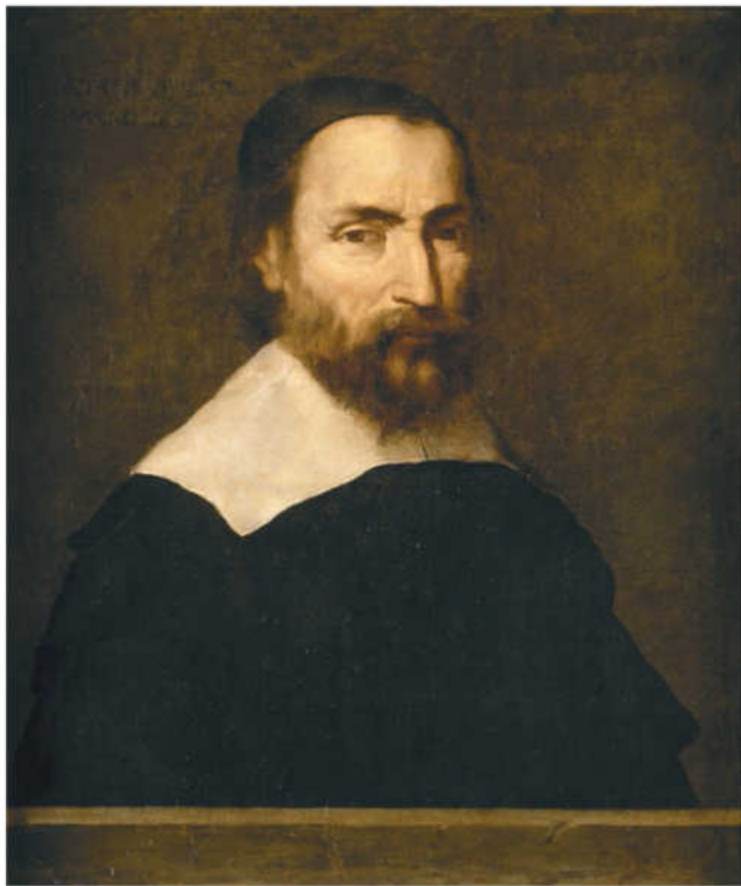
Jean Magy of Marseille, who has been for a long time in Egypt, up to 20-odd years, says he has seen there diverse vases and utensils in common usage, of a form very similar or close to those of the ancients....

Merchants did much more for Peiresc than fetch—or fail to fetch—the objects he wanted. They were his trusted colleagues in interpretation, and Peiresc drew something of his own intellectual style—his marvelous ability to make chronological jumps from antiquity to his own time, to connect what he could learn about the ancient Mediterranean with the present—from them.

More than forty years ago, Michael Baxandall brilliantly evoked the formidable skills that every merchant in fifteenth-century Tuscany had to master: arithmetic and accounting, gauging the size of barrels and other containers, judging horseflesh—and, ideally, showing a neat leg when called on to dance. Peiresc's merchants recognizably belong to the same stable as Baxandall's, and Miller makes a strong case for taking them seriously as thinkers with wide interests and multiple competences—an argument that enriches, from another angle, the vision of mer-

cantile culture in early modern Marseilles that Junko Thérèse Takada put forward a few years ago.

Questions arise. At times—as when Miller treats Peiresc's measurements of the Mediterranean or his efforts to survey the resources and customs of the Mediterranean lands—he takes care to place his hero in his setting, to show how he built on the enterprises and methods of others. At other times, though, he assumes, rather than argues, that Peiresc's approach to a problem both marked a radical innovation and opened the road to still-greater ones. In thinking about fossils, for example, Peiresc insisted that the different layers of earth in which fossils appeared represented different periods in the planet's development. Miller emphasizes the novelty of this geological "history of time": Peiresc, he tells us, adumbrated and may have inspired the more famous views of Robert Hooke. Perhaps. But an interest in distinct strata and the fossils they preserve hardly began with Peiresc. Ivano Dal Prete has shown that as early as the fifteenth century, Italian natural philosophers and artists read the earth's history much as Peiresc did. So did the most famous of all writers on underground treasure, the sixteenth-century scholar Georgius Agricola, whose heavily illustrated treatise on metals and mining inspired many of the learned to explore underground realms.



Nicolas Fabri de Peiresc; portrait attributed to Ludovicus Finson, early seventeenth century

Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon/RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource

*Miller evokes the senior scholars, specialists on the ancient and medieval worlds, who have brought Mediterranean history back to life: Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *Michael McCormick, David Abulafia and Chris Wickham*. For the early modern period see, for example, Eric R. Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople: Nation, Identity, and Coexistence in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006) and *Renegade Women: Gender, Identity, and Boundaries in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011); E. Natalie Rothman, *Brokering Empire: Trans-Imperial Subjects Between Venice and Istanbul* (Cornell University Press, 2011); John-Paul A. Ghobrial, *The Whispers of Cities: Information Flows in Istanbul, London, and Paris in the Age of William Trumbull* (Oxford University Press, 2013). Additional footnotes appear in the Web version of this article at www.nybooks.com.

More generally, Miller doesn't directly address the largest questions of all. Was Peiresc's enterprise unique? Or distinctive? Or did it share vital features with the projects of his contemporaries? Recent work on British virtuosi of the seventeenth century has revealed that they too cocooned themselves in vast archives. Richard Yeo and Elizabeth Yale have made clear that the urge to record every observation—as well as excerpts from reading and material from letters—infected many members of the early Royal Society. William Newman, Lawrence Principe, and others have recovered treasures of empirical observation and experiment from the “chymical” notebooks of Boyle, Locke, and Newton, as well as less canonical figures like George Starkey (better known by his pseudonym Eirenaeus Philalethes).

Similar developments took place closer to Peiresc as well. Gianna Pomata and Andrew Mendelsohn have traced a history of close observation of particulars—sometimes published as “observations,” sometimes buried in masses of notebooks and bureaucratic documents—in which Continental medical men play the central part. Generations of scholars have reconstructed the paper universes constructed by Ulisse Aldrovandi in the sixteenth century and Cassiano dal Pozzo, whom Peiresc knew, in the seventeenth. More generally, scholars have shown that many Europeans of Peiresc's time—including astute merchants and eager customers—thought hard about the rich materials, strange objects, and exotic plants with which a burgeoning economy and expanding trade filled their houses. You didn't have to be a virtuoso to be fascinated by silk, tulips, or artifacts of every kind. Which of these figures resemble Peiresc? Which do not?

Miller's greatest achievement—and it is remarkable—is to portray Peiresc as a figure in a period landscape: someone who shared skills and interests with contemporaries. But his work would have gained by looking away from the microscope even more often. Many of the steps that Peiresc executed, and that Miller describes in absorbing detail, belong to a period choreography—one that was known and practiced not only on Peiresc's coast of the Mediterranean, but more widely.

Consider just one case—one well known to Peiresc himself. In 1633 Peiresc heard a report that the Orthodox patriarch of Constantinople, Cyril Lucaris, had just sent the king of England “a book obtained from Egypt, a Greek Old and New Testament written by a woman about the time of the Council of Nicea [AD 325].” Cyril had in fact just given King Charles what is known as the Codex Alexandrinus: a Bible containing the Old and New Testaments in Greek, which is now one of the treasures of the British Library. It is a distinctive manuscript: a massive parchment codex written in the fifth century in majuscule letters, and heavily corrected. Cyril not only sent it, he added a note about its origins:

This book of the Scriptures of the New and Old Testament, as our tradition has it, was written by the hand of Thecla, a noble Egyptian woman, around 1300 years ago, a

little after the Council of Nicea. The name of Thecla was written at the end. But once the Muslims had put an end to Christianity in Egypt, the books of the Christians were reduced to a similar condition. Hence the name of Thecla was erased and mutilated. But memory and modern tradition preserve it.

An earlier note toward the beginning of the manuscript, written in Arabic, ascribes it to “Thecla the martyr,” a Christian woman of the first century, about whom many legends bloomed in later centuries. This was very likely the modern “tradition” that Cyril recorded and hoped to preserve. In 1625 he told Sir Thomas Roe, English ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, that the manuscript had been “written by the hand of Tecla the protomartyr of the Greeks, that liued in the tyme of St. Paul.” Yet he clearly also looked at the manuscript itself, as a striking material object, while he weighed the probability of this tradition. Roe, by his own confession no scholar, described its script as “very fayre, a character that I haue neuer seene.” Eventually, Cyril reached a compromise. He was willing to believe that the manuscript was the work of a female scribe named Thecla. But by 1627 he redated both her and her codex to the time “of the councell of Nice”—that is, to the fourth century, when, as was widely known, Greek and Latin were still written in majuscule letters. This judicious synthesis of ancient and modern, oral and material evidence was worthy of Peiresc himself.

The two men had more in common than an interest in biblical manuscripts. Peiresc found inspiration in the polyglot scholars and information brokers of the generation before his own: Joseph Scaliger, Isaac Casaubon, and Gian Vincenzo Pinelli. Cyril found inspiration in the erudite and independent-minded Cretan scholar Maximus Margounius, who taught him in Venice and coached him when he entered the University of Padua. Peiresc took a deep interest in transporting texts across the Mediterranean. So did Cyril: in his case, printed Greek texts, for the use of his fellow Greeks under Ottoman rule. Peiresc collected both ancient objects and modern traditions about them, moved with comfort and ease from the one to the other, and connected them when he could. So, as we have seen, did Cyril.

From Istanbul, where Cyril lived and died, to Peiresc's Provence, and across Europe from Prague to Paris and beyond, centers of learning abounded. Many of them were also inhabited by virtuosi of this period type—mute inglorious ones, whose papers remain tied up in their bundles or bound in volumes unopened for decades, or who left none, so that their tastes and ideas must be conjured from their possessions. Peter Miller's reanimation of Peiresc, the master of the Mediterranean, is the best kind of case study. It not only makes us appreciate the range and richness of one man's experience and the originality of his thought, but also suggests that he had many colleagues in his deepest and most imaginative inquiries. Most important, it gives us hope that their archives too will be opened up by scholars skillful and imaginative enough to make them speak to us. □

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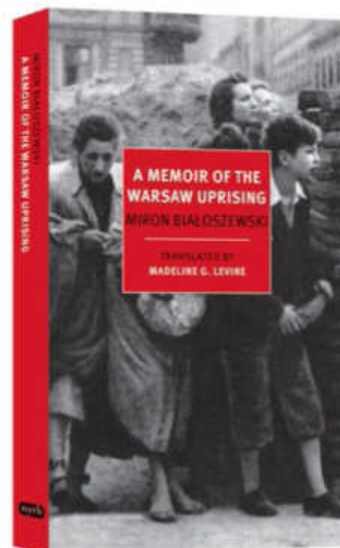
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Madeline G. Levine has extensively revised her 1977 translation, and passages that were unpublished in Communist Poland have been restored.

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Bernie & Hillary & the Future

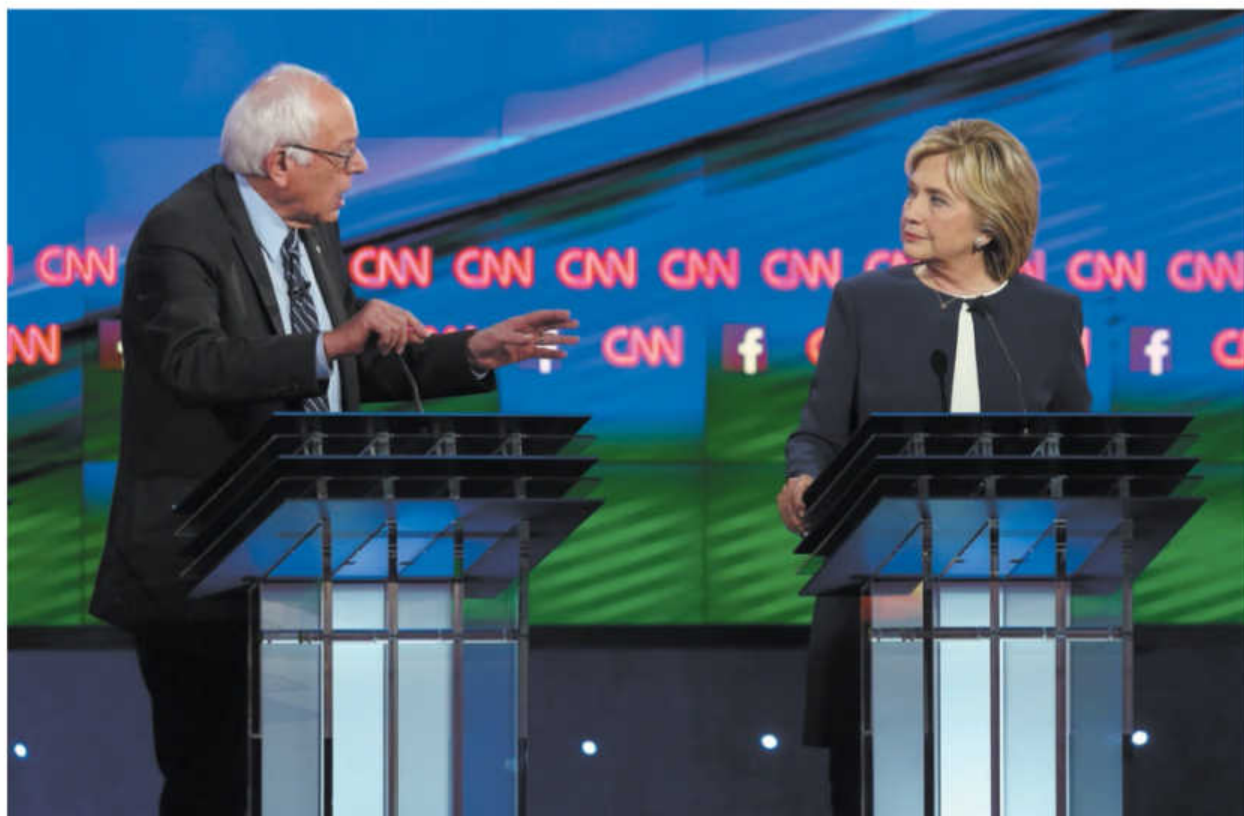
Charles Simic

This was, indeed, a very different presidential debate from the ones Republicans had in August and September. Sixteen candidates then used their allotted time trying to outdo each other in scaring Americans out of their pants by warning them about enemies everywhere, from illegal immigrants pouring across our borders, selling drugs and sex and bringing all kinds of disease, to jack-booted government agents wrestling guns out of the hands of mothers protecting their children from thugs breaking into their homes, to countries like Iran, Russia, and China interfering with our ambitions to make the planet a cradle of democracy, to which they promised ultimatums followed by military action once they got into the White House.

All this when they were not raising alarms about living babies being chopped up here at home by Planned Parenthood employees and having their body parts sold, or promising to close federal agencies that protect consumers and to dismantle regulations that stand in the way of banks and businesses, while getting rid of entirely or significantly reducing most of the programs for the less fortunate, from Obamacare to Social Security and Medicare.

One expects imbecilities and outright lies from politicians running for office, but not so much undisguised meanness and desire to hurt people. Many of the conservatives we saw seemed moved by nothing as much as hatred. Women, young people, blacks, immigrants, gays, liberals, teachers—the list could go on for pages. The impression I had was that there was a wish to see the lives of millions and millions of their fellow citizens made miserable. The audience loved it. Applause greeted many of these heartless pronouncements. They didn't sound to me like a crowd pining to elect a future president of a constitutional democracy.

No wonder the Republicans found the Democratic debate dull. What could be more boring than listening to Senator Bernie Sanders telling us that we have the highest rate of childhood poverty of any major country in the world and more wealth and income inequality than any other, and that we are the sole advanced country that does not guarantee health care to all of its people as a right of citizenship, or Hillary Clinton calling for mandated paid family leave when Carly Fiorina, the first female CEO of a Fortune 20 company, made it clear that if the government requires paid leave, it will force small businesses to “hire fewer people and create fewer jobs”—despite California, a state as big as many countries, having had a paid leave program for a number of years with no ill effect of the kind she fears?



Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton at the Democratic presidential debate, Las Vegas, October 2015

I must confess that I didn't know what to expect from the Democratic debate, although I expected it would be less about fooling the voters and more about informing them. The candidates didn't disappoint. They talked about gun control, the Middle East, the power of Wall Street, student loans, undocumented immigrants, global warming, Black Lives Matter, Social Security, the Patriot Act, government surveillance, and the widespread corruption that'll keep anything from happening as long as there is no campaign finance reform. Even Edward Snowden was mentioned, whom Sanders praised, allowing that a “penalty” would be appropriate for his breaking the law, while Clinton claimed he ought to “fac[e] the music,” adding (implausibly) that he could have been a whistleblower and gotten all of the protections of being a whistleblower here at home, while raising all the issues that he raised, hinting at the same time that he stole very important information that has fallen into a lot of the wrong hands.

Hillary Clinton is a politician whom I've learned not to fully trust. She may sound like a passionate fighter for truth, but in her long political life she hasn't shown much spine confronting Wall Street and our warmongers and has on occasion turned her back on progressive principles when they conflicted with her ambitions. Still, with Bernie Sanders sharing the stage and sounding like one of those soapbox orators I heard in the Chicago of my youth, I knew there would be some fireworks, but wondered what effect they would have. These debates are now produced as lavish spectacles rather than serious political events in the life of a democracy and come accompanied with numerous distractions, starting with multiple lights and screens in the auditorium and lengthy interruptions for commercials whose banality and hype, despite their sleek production qualities, are not only irritating under the circumstances, but seem more suitable

to an Academy Awards presentation or a Miss America Pageant presided over by Donald Trump.

However, once the debate got going I was proven wrong. I found it captivating throughout, an impression confirmed by reading the transcript. The questions from Anderson Cooper varied in quality but were designed to draw out interesting responses, and the answers by the candidates often exceeded expectations. The pundits and some polls declared Clinton the winner, Joe Klein in *Time* calling her a voice of sanity, while other polls (backed by what I saw people posting on Facebook) said that Sanders was the winner. Right from the start of the debate it was clear that these five Democrats would be addressing issues that many Americans care about and the Republican Party either ignores or dismisses with contempt. Here's Bernie Sanders's opening speech:

I think most Americans understand that our country today faces a series of unprecedented crises. The middle class of this country for the last forty years has been disappearing. Millions of Americans are working longer hours for lower wages, and yet almost all of the new income and wealth being created is going to the top one percent.

As a result of this disastrous *Citizens United* Supreme Court decision, our campaign finance system is corrupt and is undermining American democracy. Millionaires and billionaires are pouring unbelievable sums of money into the political process in order to fund Super PACs and to elect candidates who represent their interests, not the interests of working people.

Today, the scientific community is virtually unanimous: climate change is real, it is caused by human activity, and we have a

moral responsibility to transform our energy system away from fossil fuel to energy efficiency and sustainable energy and leave this planet a habitable planet for our children and our grandchildren.

Today in America, we have more people in jail than any other country on earth. African-American youth unemployment is 51 percent. Hispanic youth unemployment is 36 percent. [He should have said “underemployment.”¹] It seems to me that instead of building more jails and providing more incarceration, maybe—just maybe—we should be putting money into education and jobs for our kids.

What this campaign is about is whether we can mobilize our people to take back our government from a handful of billionaires and create the vibrant democracy we know we can and should have.

Hillary Clinton was not as blunt in her analysis of what ails us, but she too proposed some “loony” policies, as the conservatives would most likely call them. She spoke of her plans to create more well-paying jobs: by investing in infrastructure and clean energy, by making it possible once again to invest in science and research, and by taking the opportunity posed by climate change to grow our economy. At the center of her campaign, she declared, will be her goal to raise all wages, including the minimum wage, and to find ways for companies to share profits with the workers who helped to make them, and to grant Americans paid family leave, which is a right in every other Western democracy.

Of course, much of our media, which treat the fake economic remedies proposed by Republicans with the utmost gravity, will say that this is pie-in-the-sky liberalism with no chance of ever being enacted. With the corrupt Congress we have today, and many voters who have little knowledge of their country's political past and our workers' long and often thwarted struggle to unionize and be paid decent wages for their work, and the equally important history of how all those gains were gradually reversed in the last thirty to forty years, the cynical journalists are not wrong.

American workers were not always so impotent. My first job, after graduating from high school in 1956, was at the *Chicago Sun-Times*, where I worked in the mail room distributing mail to different departments of the

¹See Tami Luhby et al., “Democratic Debate: Fact-checking the Candidates,” CNN.com, October 15, 2015.

paper together with several other young men. Being the youngest, I was given the composing and printing rooms in the basement and the dock where they loaded printed papers onto the waiting trucks. Since there were three mail deliveries every weekday, I spent a good amount of time down there and got to know a number of workers, middle-aged and older, who after discovering from my accent that I was a recent arrival to the United States took it upon themselves to explain to me what this country is about, telling me over the course of a year much that Senator Sanders was saying the other night. They knew from their long experience with labor strikes and union organizing who their enemies were, and they had no illusions that things would soon change.

The memory of their faces and stories came back to me when I heard Anderson Cooper ask the senator from Vermont in an incredulous tone of voice: "You don't consider yourself a capitalist?" The senator from Vermont took the question seriously and wondered aloud:

Do I consider myself part of the casino capitalist process by which so few have so much and so many have so little by which Wall Street's greed and recklessness wrecked this economy? No, I don't.

Clinton then remarked that when she thinks about capitalism, she thinks "about all the small businesses that were started because we have the opportunity and the freedom in our country for people to do that and to make a good living for themselves and their families." To call the owners of a corner grocery capitalists is ludicrous. They may be a family-owned business, but putting them under the same label as franchises and large corporations that have multiple operations in various locations is the kind of bullshit that makes one recoil.

Sanders also tried to pass off some baloney, though not as often as Clinton. His explanation for voting five times against the Brady Bill, which mandated background checks for people buying guns, and insisting that it was a bad idea to hold gun manufacturers legally responsible for mass shootings, giving the excuse that he lives in a rural state, was easily refuted by Governor Martin O'Malley, who pointed out that in Maryland, he and the legislature were able to pass such a bill while still respecting the hunting traditions of people who live in rural areas. Clinton also didn't hedge: "I think that we have to look at the fact that we lose ninety people a day from gun violence. [She neglected to say that these include suicides.²]

²See Tami Luhby et al., "Fact-checking the Candidates."

This has gone on too long and it's time the entire country stood up against the NRA."

Another interesting exchange was the one about Syria, in which Sanders recommended that we stay out of a quagmire, Clinton called for a no-fly zone, and O'Malley said that it would be a mistake, since with the Russian air force already in the air, it could lead to an escalation due to an accident. As president, he said, he would not be so quick to resort to a military response, which is something Clinton can certainly be accused of. Here's her explanation for why the United States bombed Libya and worked to overthrow its government:

Well, let's remember what was going on. We had a murderous dictator, Qaddafi, who had American blood on his hands, as I'm sure you remember, threatening to massacre large numbers of the Libyan people. We had our closest allies in Europe burning up the phone lines begging us to help them try to prevent what they saw as a mass genocide, in their words. And we had the Arabs standing by our side saying, "We want you to help us deal with Qaddafi."

Our response, which I think was smart power at its best, is that the United States will not lead this. We will provide essential, unique capabilities that we have, but the Europeans and the Arabs had to be first over the line. We did not put one single American soldier on the ground in Libya....

And the Libyan people had a free election for the first time since 1951. And you know what, they voted for moderates, they voted with the hope of democracy. Because of the Arab Spring, because of a lot of other things, there was turmoil to be followed.

Talk about not learning anything from experience. If this is what she really believes, and if she sees the brutal fighting among Libyan tribes, militias, and others as caused in any large part by the Arab Spring, she's ignoring the realities that have been reported, and she poses a risk that if she becomes president she may not avoid colossal failures of judgment. As for Sanders, he's too much of a realist, I believe, to imagine that he has a chance of becoming president and is running merely to enlighten the public about the realities that are being hidden from them by our corrupt politicians and our groveling media and to start a mass movement among the younger voters that would fight for the liberal values in which he believes.

I look forward to the next debate. ☐

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‘The Pope & the Planet’: An Exchange

To the Editors:

Professor William D. Nordhaus [“The Pope and the Planet,” *NYR*, October 8] writes that water in California is not scarce, but only underpriced. The snow-packs in the Sierras, however, are at a five-hundred-year low and market forces cannot make it snow. Professor Nordhaus’s argument about cap-and-trade is on the level of ways and means, a level different from *Laudato Si’*, which, among other things, is concerned with magical thinking and market idolatry.

Papal encyclicals are not research papers. They are intended to apply the teaching of the Church to current circumstances, so some attention to the state of scientific knowledge is appropriate, but as expressions of the moral and doctrinal tradition, their primary sources are previous encyclicals, not secular research.

The usual method is to begin with first principles (such as “God intends human beings to be stewards of creation, so it is wrong for us to wreck the common home”). Encyclicals consist mostly of more specific imperatives—called *middle maxims*—that apply these first principles in the current situation (such as “we ought to reduce carbon footprints and CO₂ emissions”). How best to fulfill these middle maxims is a matter of prudential judgment, the appropriate prerogative of well-informed people of goodwill. This is sometimes called the “principle of subsidiarity”: the Church’s *magisterium* does not extend to ways and means; an encyclical is not a detailed manifesto for action.

So it is not surprising that Pope Francis “points out the need to replace fossil fuels with renewable energy and conservation” (a middle maxim), but does not try to answer prudential questions such as “who will develop the new energy technologies that will replace fossil fuels?” To ask why people would “use more expensive fuels when cheap fossil fuels are available” is like asking why people would refrain from robbing their neighbors: because it is morally wrong to behave otherwise. Of course, sometimes human law needs to incentivize right behavior, and that is where cap-and-trade policies may be useful, on the level of prudential judgments about ways and means.

In my reading of *Laudato Si’*, the pope does not oppose such policies, but warns against their corrupt manipulation and, above all, against the idolatrous claim that the market can solve all our problems—

against thinking that the market can make it snow in the mountains.

The Rev. William J. Teska
Retired Episcopal priest
Adjunct Instructor in Ethics
Argosy University
Orange, California

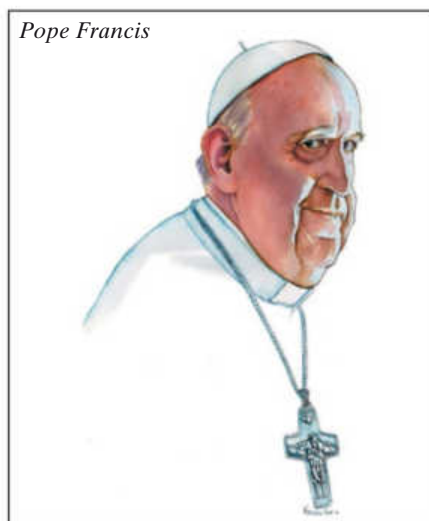
To the Editors:

William Nordhaus’s thoughtful reaction to Pope Francis’s *Laudato Si’* proves that the pope has achieved one of his stated purposes. He has used the world’s bulledest pulpit to spark an urgent discussion on how we can best care for “Our Common Home.” But by understandably restricting his reply to the economics, Nordhaus misses something the pope is even more concerned about, namely that we live not just in a market economy, but also a market society and culture, one that increasingly warps our deepest values. Francis is worried that we are beginning to view not just the earth but the meaning of life and death through a narrow monetary prism. But this means we miss out on the joy of living while falling prey to a “globalization of indifference.” I don’t believe Francis wants to abolish markets, but he realizes, as Nordhaus seems to as well, that we need a system that puts persons instead of profits first, and that unguided and unregulated markets can wreak havoc both with our planet and with our souls.

Harvey Cox
Hollis Research Professor of Divinity
Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts

To the Editors:

William Nordhaus’s timely and eloquent review of *Laudato Si’* failed to mention one of the most powerful effects of bringing market forces to bear on climate change: increasing the investment and effort into innovation in the fields of energy conservation, fuel alternatives, and methods for reducing CO₂ emissions. In an age of warp-speed technological change, when new improved products hit the grocery shelves and electronics stores at an ever increasing pace, the innovation in these fields has been stymied by a lack of financial rewards for those who would come up with new ideas. As suggested, market forces are not antithetical to the solution; on the contrary



Pope Francis

they will generate the solution. We need to have a price on CO₂ emissions to unlock the Lever of Riches that is human ingenuity to solve this crisis.

Rebecca Stein
Director
Microeconomics Principles Program
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

William D. Nordhaus replies:

The letters by William Teska and Harvey Cox share a common response to Pope Francis’s encyclical and my review of it. Like the pope, and like the comments I made in my review, they have deep reservations about the way that economic forces and incentives have penetrated the deepest corners of our society, even the furthest corners of the world, through the process of globalization. In Cox’s view, even “the meaning of life and death” is viewed through a narrow monetary prism. We need to put “persons instead of profits first.”

I emphasized in my review the limitations of the market, both in generating high levels of inequality and in leading to environmental degradation. But to focus my response on the environment, it is insufficient to reverse environmental degradation by relying on first principles and middle maxims (to use the language of Reverend Teska’s letter). These principles and maxims may help educate people about the goals of the Catholic Church or of different societies, but they will do little to curb the 32 billion tons of annual carbon dioxide emissions of seven billion people, each

making multiple decisions about energy use 365 days a year.

To solve environmental problems, we need to move to the practical arts of economics and politics. When scientists and economists began studying climate change four decades ago, neither the scope of the problem nor the solutions were evident. After years of experiments with different approaches, it has become clear that the most reliable approach to bending the curve of emissions and slowing climate change is market-based instruments like near-universal carbon taxes or cap-and-trade policies that raise the price of carbon emissions. Voluntary measures, actions of people of goodwill, and even regulatory actions on cars and power plants will not come close to meeting the targets of governments and Pope Francis.

Perhaps what Reverend Teska calls “prudential judgments” about the environment, the ways and means, are not appropriate subjects of an encyclical. If that is so, then it would have been better to refrain from condemning market instruments (carbon credits) and leaving the subject open to “well-informed people of goodwill.” It might have been better to emphasize the morality and importance of the “polluter pay principle” and to point to possible ways that that principle can be implemented. By condemning carbon credits, Pope Francis discouraged the exploration of market-based approaches.

The letter by Rebecca Stein is by contrast right on target. We need high carbon prices to give incentives for inventors and innovators to develop and introduce low-carbon technologies. I will illustrate this with a simple example. Suppose you are in charge of research and development at a large company like General Electric, which had an R&D budget of \$4 billion in 2014. You do research on energy from coal, natural gas, nuclear energy, wind, and other sources. If carbon prices are going to be very low, then gas- and coal-burning plants will continue to be an important source of profits, and you will continue to do substantial R&D on those technologies. On the other hand, if you expect carbon prices to rise sharply, zero-carbon technologies like wind, solar, and nuclear power will be the sources of energy on which to place your research bets. Market mechanisms for the environment will make carbon-rich processes unprofitable, and low-carbon sectors profitable. That is the proper role for profits in a well-regulated market economy.

LETTERS

WHEN KILLERS PLAYED VICTIMS

To the Editors:

I was honored by Ian Buruma’s insightful reflection on my films *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence* [*NYR*, October 22]. However, Mr. Buruma’s review contains factual errors about the production that I feel should be addressed. Mr. Buruma writes, regarding *The Act of Killing*’s dramatization of the massacre of villagers at Kampung Kolam, North Sumatra:

In another brutal reenactment for the cameras, a village is raided, with actual villagers playing the victims of rape and cutthroat killings. Children can’t stop weeping once the filming is over.

I would never have contemplated creating this scene in the way Mr. Buruma imagines. I would never ask villagers to act in a dra-

matization of a massacre featuring—and directed by—the actual perpetrators.

The “villagers” are perpetrators and members of their immediate families. The “village” is a film set, and the weeping children were auditioned for their ability to cry on cue. (Children unable to cry were placed farther from the cameras, so that their giggling would be obscured by bonfires arranged in the foreground.) None of the children was told that the scene is based on actual atrocities carried out by their grandparents. Some children would continue to cry after we called “cut,” but this is not unusual in situations where child actors should cry, and they were immediately comforted by their families and the film crew.

Mr. Buruma describes a woman who appears on the verge of fainting. She is the wife of death squad leader Ali Usman, whom we see a few minutes earlier on an Indonesian state television talk show threatening, “God hates the Communists. There will be no reconciliation.” Mr. Usman’s wife would not say she fainted, but rather was *kesurupan*, or possessed. The paramilitary members whispering prayers in her ears are, in fact, conducting a quiet exorcism.

We had a rule that survivors should not participate in *The Act of Killing*. We were concerned, above all, for their safety: survivors could become easy targets of the perpetrators’ anger after the film’s release. We discovered later that one of the paramilitary leaders, Mr. Suryono, was also a survivor, in the sense that his stepfather had been killed. Yet Mr. Suryono’s participation was inadvertent: a second camera-person not fluent in Indonesian filmed Mr. Suryono telling his stepfather’s story, and I became aware of the story only months later, while editing. Elsewhere in the film, we see Chinese shopkeepers being extorted by paramilitary leaders. I reimbursed each shopkeeper after filming, and explained that our purpose in filming was to expose the perpetrators’ crimes.

These may seem like minor clarifications, but for a filmmaker they are fundamental—examples of how we must find ways of working ethically in difficult circumstances, even when there may be no ethically perfect solution. Having spent so many years trying to expose mechanisms of fear and violence, the last thing I’d want is to replicate that violence in my own film production.

We therefore did whatever we could to ensure that every scene was a safe space for all participants—even though all of us, in confronting such painful aspects of human experience, were necessarily pushed beyond our comfort zones.

Once again, I am grateful for Mr. Buruma’s generous review.

Joshua Oppenheimer
Copenhagen, Denmark

EL SISTEMA’S ENEMY

To the Editors:

That Nicholas Kenyon, the director of a major orchestral venue, should leap to the defense of an orchestral training program, El Sistema, is predictable. More surprising is that such an important intellectual figure should fail to engage properly with my book *El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela’s Youth* [*NYR*, September 24]. He substitutes caricature for critical analysis, focusing on trivial details (e.g., *Mozart in the Jungle*) and disregarding serious issues (such as

Beneath the media's fantasy version lies a real Sistema, which I explore in depth; Kenyon, however, with his Hollywoodesque title, takes us back toward the shallows. He ignores rafts of evidence from musicians and scholars, relying instead on international Sistema advocates. Yet Tricia Tunstall described her book on El Sistema as "reportage, not scholarship," designed "to proselytize on behalf of its mission." Why does Kenyon give so much credit to boosterish opinions and so little to peer-reviewed research? One looks in vain for any scholarly foundation to his views.

Ignoring research and recycling platitudes lead Kenyon into trouble. He believes that “only through musical agreement are the best performances realized—as anyone will testify who has witnessed musical performances where there is lack of agreement.” Yet the Simón Bolívar Orchestra, which he so loves, is a rigidly authoritarian ensemble, nicknamed the Venezuelan Slave Orchestra. Furthermore, exhaustive research by Richard Hackman found a correlation between orchestral performance quality and authoritarian leadership. Both the research and Kenyon’s own ears, then, contradict his conclusion; in fact, the sound of autocracy can be thrilling.

Basic errors suggest that Kenyon failed to read the introduction. More interesting, however, is his moral stance. He does not counter the suggestion that José Antonio Abreu is ruthless, but rather argues that El Sistema's leader was right to dismiss one of his longest-serving colleagues because he had a good replacement lined up. Like Abreu, Kenyon appears to believe that the ends justify the means.

Geoffrey Baker

Director, Institute of Musical Research
Royal Holloway University
London, England

I am disappointed that Geoffrey Baker, while unsurprisingly critical of my review, does not acknowledge any of the positive points I made about his book. His reply is unwilling to admit a single positive aspect of *El Sistema*, ignores those areas where I do “push for change,” and instead reverts to his “scholarly” method of accusation by innuendo (“slick,” “lofty,” “celebrities”). This is a puzzling way to pursue a discussion about one of the most influential movements in music education today.

In the last German free election of November 6, 1932 (before Hitler was appointed chancellor by President von Hindenburg), the Nazis obtained 196 seats in the Reichstag versus 100 for the Communists and 121 for the Social Democrats. The results were similar in terms of total votes, the Nazis with 11.74 million (down from their high the previous July), the Communists with 5.98 million, and the Social Democrats with 7.24 million. Hitler was able to rule only with a coalition. Tragically, the two left parties were foes at the time. The next election, in March 1933, was a farce given the terror unleashed against the left. Nevertheless, even under the most dire conditions, the combined left still obtained more than 12 million votes against Hitler's 17 million plus.

Martin Oppenheimer
Franklin Township, New Jersey

I am grateful to Martin Oppenheimer for providing the numbers of votes for and against Hitler in the 1932 and 1933 elections. The numbers confirm the fact that Hitler was elected by a solid plurality. In addition to the campaign of intimidation, there were other reasons for his victory. One reason was that he promised to put the country back to work, after long years of economic misery and high unemployment. He did what he promised, with the result that his public support endured.

I am grateful for Mark Lilla's generous and probing review of my book *How the French Think: An Affectionate Portrait of an Intellectual People* [NYR, October 22]. However it begins with a basic misunderstanding: on offer here is not a general survey of French thought, but an attempt to explain the style, the rhetoric, and the discursive techniques that are characteristic of French thinking. That said, the book deals extensively with many of the subjects Mr. Lilla claims are missing: thus, an entire chapter is devoted to utopianism, and therefore to the question of how the French think about the future.

I would also question Mr. Lilla's assertion that television has become "the biggest gear in the French culture machine." If we compare current levels of cultural programming on mainstream French channels with the late twentieth century, there has been an incontestable decline—the few surviv-

Mr. Lilla also overstates the extent to which America continues to loom in the French mind. Tocqueville's hold over the French imagination is over: those Gallic intellectuals and politicians who aspire to less economic regulation, more pluralism, and greater devolution tend to look nowadays to Britain, and America these days mostly inspires indifference rather than resentment. Indeed Mr. Lilla exhibits a glorious touch of ethnocentrism when he suggests that the French are currently divided between California dreamers and New York wannabes. Are these the only two available options? Perhaps your reviewer too has caught the French disease of reducing everything to binary oppositions.

Between World War II and the 1980s, getting a sense of what was going on in French culture and intellectual life seemed a simple matter. One read the papers *Le Monde* and possibly *Libération* (more seldom the conservative *Le Figaro*, whose circulation is slightly larger). One looked at a few literary revues and weeklies like *L'Obs*, glanced at the books on the tables at the bookstore La Hune, and tried to catch the latest episode of *Apostrophes*. That is no longer sufficient—or, since La Hune and *Apostrophes* have disappeared, even possible. As in most Western countries, today culture in France is being refracted into many different forms and media.

People watch much more television than ever before and thanks to cable the number of stations is now relatively large and diverse. Most are banal but some, like Arte and Canal+, represent something new. News websites focusing on investigative reporting and scandal, spanning the political spectrum, are challenging the staid traditional media. There are inventive sites for those interested in books, politics, art, dance, and music. Hip-hop, which is political and hugely influential in the *banlieue* housing projects, is its own island, with more bridges extending to North Africa than to the bourgeois arrondissements of Paris. The equally influential and isolated far right blogosphere is a force to be reckoned with, politically and intellectually. Do the same style, rhetoric, and discursive techniques Professor Hazareesingh thinks are characteristically French appear in these realms of contemporary culture as well? I'm curious to know, and I'm sure other readers of his stimulating book will be as well. He does not say, but his thesis depends on it.

As any reader of Tocqueville's *The Old Regime and the Revolution* will attest, I'm not alone in thinking that French institutional and social conservatism almost always dashes dreams of "sweeping change." What really deserves explanation is how the French myth of their political daring survives its almost daily refutation, much like America's myth of itself as the land of common sense. As for French attitudes toward the United States, it's true that Britain is far more attractive to young people and businessmen as a place to work today. But



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the inspiration of British neoliberalism was of course the US, as Mrs. Thatcher was the first to admit. And the French know that. If Professor Hazareesingh has never found himself at a Paris dinner party with, on his right, a bore just returned from a tour of Bay Area start-ups, and, to his left, a bore waxing nostalgic about his years working for a Wall Street hedge fund, he is a luckier man than I.

DENG: EVEN MORE BRUTAL

To the Editors:

In Jonathan Mirsky’s “The Bloodthirsty Deng We Didn’t Know” [NYR, October 22], we could perhaps round off Deng Xiaoping’s bloodthirsty record by mentioning that he opposed Mao Zedong for initiating the Hundred Flowers Campaign, and for allowing some criticism of the Party. Subsequently, when Mao reversed his line, Deng was put in charge of the anti-rightist campaign to take care of “stinking” intellectuals and critics of the Party. About 2.9 million people were accused of rightism. About five hundred thousand, by Deng’s own estimate (offered in 1980), were condemned. The campaign was marked by great brutality.

Jamyang Norbu
Monteagle, Tennessee

THE VISION
OF CENTRAL PARK

To the Editors:

To Martin Filler’s excellent, comprehensive review of new Olmsted publications [NYR, November 5] could be added an important point about his and Vaux’s visionary design of Central Park. Yes, it was deeply inspired by European models but the design was also a reaction to a particularly local development that was horrifying Olmsted: the rectilinear street grid plan of Manhattan. Ordained in 1811 to provide an orderly expansion of the unplanned town spreading from Manhattan’s southern tip, the grid marched mercilessly northward, flattening and regimenting the naturalistically varied island in its path. Filler lauds “Olmsted’s ability to imagine how a barren stretch of urban wasteland could be turned into an idyllic glade,” but in the early 1850s the area that was to become Central Park was distinctly pre-urban, that is, it had been doomed under the 1811 plan to become an indistinguishable segment of an unbroken island-spread grid. Just as straight new streets were reaching that area, prescient officials (not all as corrupt as Filler says) carved out a measure of relief. “The time will come,” Olmsted wrote in 1858 in a report to the park planning commissioners,

when New York will be built-up, when all the grading and filling will be done, when the picturesquely varied rock formations of the island will have been converted into the foundations for rows of monotonous straight streets, and piles of erect, angular buildings. There will be no suggestion left of its present varied surface, with the single exception of the few acres contained in the Park.

Affronted by the prospect of a right-angled flatland, Olmsted with Vaux fashioned a space of no right angles: bridges, roads, pathways, ponds, fields, play spaces—practically all of it curvilinear, diagonal, serpentine. Olmsted’s park is the anti-grid, New York’s unique anti-urban urban center. The irony, of course, is that the park itself is a rectangle, like a wondrously equipped but nevertheless rigidly bounded exercise yard within a vast rectilinear penitentiary. I’ve wondered if this irony bothered Olmsted.

Gerard Koeppel
New York City

SQUARE ROOTS

To the Editors:

Rebecca Newberger Goldstein writes in her review of Colin McGinn’s *Philosophy of Language: The Classics Explained* [NYR, October 8]: “‘The square root of 4’ is a rigid designator, referring to 2 in all possible worlds.” Oh no, this is so only in the world of positive numbers. In the world of real numbers, it also refers to –2. Loose use of language can lead even philosophers astray. Rigorous use of mathematics won’t allow it, however.

George Szpiro
Neue Zürcher Zeitung
New York City

Rebecca Newberger Goldstein replies:

The first error in George Szpiro’s letter is his assertion that the singular definite description “the square root” refers to two entities, a number’s positive and negative square roots. Grammar and semantics preclude using a definite description to refer to two things in a given context. Given the semantics of definite descriptions, “the square root of 4 are even numbers” is ungrammatical. So perhaps a definite description should not have been used by me at all? Not so, as the *Wikipedia* entry for “square root” makes clear: “Although the principal square root of a positive number is only one of its two square roots, the designation ‘the square root’ is often used to refer to the principal square root” (that is, the positive one; italics in the original).

So even if, defying grammar and common usage, the expression “the square root of 4” could refer either to one or two numbers, my particular use of it could only refer to one number, for reasons that the book I was reviewing makes clear. McGinn recounts how Paul Grice’s seminal essay “Meaning” explains how terms that are ambiguous in an isolated sentence may be unambiguous in the context of the discourse. According to Grice’s Maxim of Relevance, the only intelligible interpretation of “the square root” in the context is “the principal square root.”

Szpiro’s additional error is to confuse the vernacular term “world” (as in “the world of positive numbers”) with the technical term “possible world,” which, as McGinn also discusses, has become a central construct in modern semantics, helping to explain the concepts of logical necessity and possibility and the meanings of names and natural kinds. A possible world describes the way the world might have been. There is no possible world in which positive integers exist but negative ones do not. Szpiro’s attempt to explain the semantics of this particular definite description by distinguishing between “the possible world” of positive numbers and “the possible world” of real numbers commits him to a category error.

Szpiro’s letter inadvertently underscores the value of the modern philosophy of language, as explicated in McGinn’s book. It gives our understanding of linguistic meaning a depth and rigor that are commensurate with the complexity of language itself, rather than leaving it as an opportunity for shallow pedantry.

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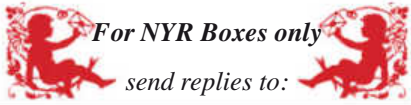
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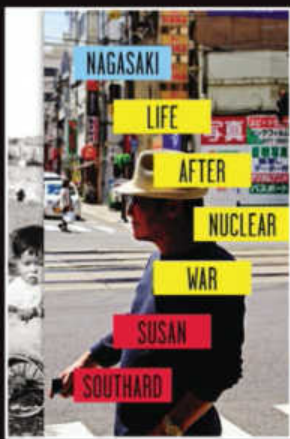
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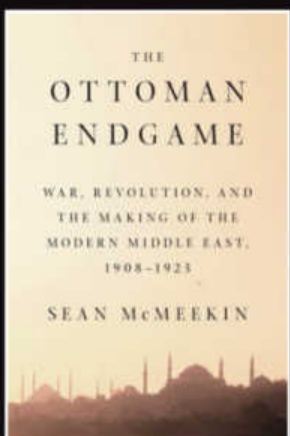
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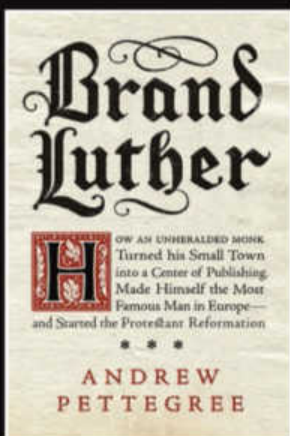
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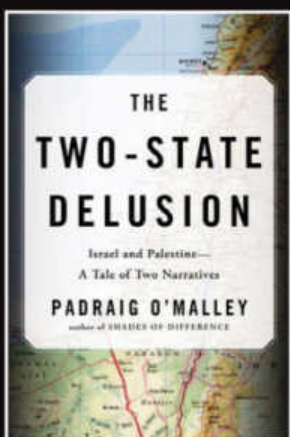
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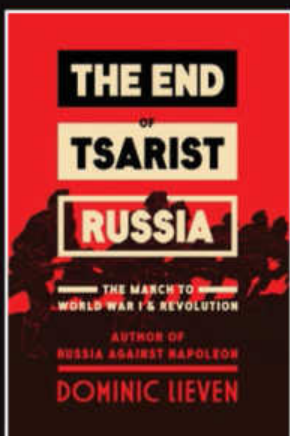
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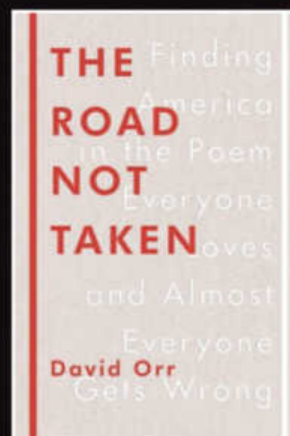
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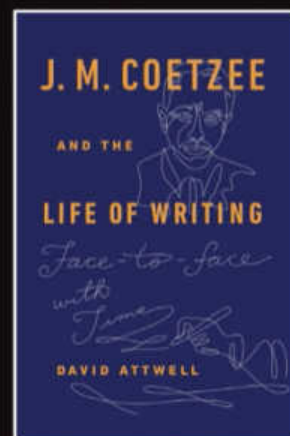
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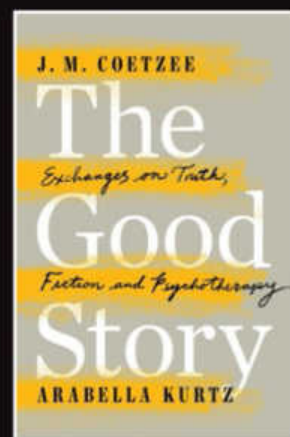
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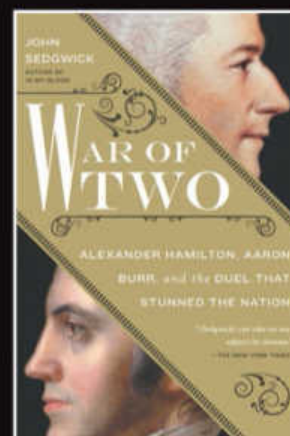
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